

TALES OF UNEXPECTED HORROR AND THE SUPERNATURAL

HAUNTS

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GENTLE TASTES (a poem) Scott E. Green

Rhode Island once had vampires
proud Yankee creatures
without immigrant accent
or antiquated titles
Bigoted, even in their diets
They scorned all Papists
even the hardy French
of the Blackstone Valley.
Instead, their well bred fangs
carressed wholesome Baptists necks
juicy
with rich Republican blood.
They feasted upon
Congregationalist, Episcopalians
even the occasional
Unitarian who voted Democrat
provided the blood
was WASP BLOD.

Alas, the patrician vampires
of Rhode Island faded
faded
because their graves
were sealed tight beneath
Interstates
and their prey
now filled their blood
with nouvelle cuisine
garlicky, so very garlicky
nouvelle cuisine.

Shame, shame
their eldritch dominion
over Loveratt's homestead
crushed,
bested to the wind
by Yankee ways
and Yankee wars
gentle tastes

RECESSION

George Guthridge

"It's the landlord about the rent, tell him I ain't home."

I heard Judith Fenster whisper from the kitchen.

Her son, a cadaverous kid with shirt-sleeve-cessed his dark hair back and grinned into my eyes. Flushed with anger and head pounding, I tried to push past and into the house. Her son nudged the wheelchair, forcing me against the door; the left wheel scraped the jamb, leaving a treadmark. Half a dozen mutt puppies, panting and scratching, looked out from behind his legs. A small gray rabbit peeked from around the corner of the hallway. Two months before, the house had smelled of fresh paint and new carpeting. Now the place reeked of dog piss, rabbit pellets, and garbage.

Gripping the wheels of the chair, I again tried to wheel inside. Our knees met. The boy reached for a monkey wrench sticking out of the back pocket of his jeans, then seemed to think better of it. There are two advantages of the chair: I don't have to stand for long stales, and it has given me the upper body strength of a Greco-Roman wrestler.

"You best come here, Ma."

"Are you so shiftless you can't even talk to the goddam landlord? Jesus H. Christ?"

Slipped and mu-mud, Judith came shuffling through the living room holding a spluttering frying pan with a helpad. She set the pan on a wooden chair and hainhook hand fisted against massive hips, glared at me for a minute, unable to find the words to express her outrage at my visit. The dogs whined and wagged, circling the chair. What looked like the torso of a rat lay in the grease. A rabbit. She and her husband had the pumpnouse and barn crammed with cages. I had purchased the farm, a lovely place with ten of the choicest acres I'd ever seen in the Wilmette Valley, on a contract from Mr. Mestlin, a maintenance clerk to retire. It waited holding more than a small down payment to keep himself, as he said, "in fishing worms

and homemade wine."

I was happy then. Finally, I'd bought a house that I didn't have to fix up in order to eke out a small profit. Even the barn had been spotless, a floor of new hay mats down for the new owners. Now the floor was a sea of mud, rabbit shtit and rusted auto parts.

Buck, pained you yesterday and told you his disability check ain't come. Scowling, she wiped her hands on her apron. "So what if the rents a little late? What right have you got coming around here pestering us?"

"He told me about the check a week ago, not yesterday." Then, my voice rising, "And no one called me. I had to phone, remember? No one here has ever bothered calling."

Without taking her eyes off me, Judith Fenster pointed to the kitchen. "Billy, you go on over 't that phone. If this young man don't get a civil longie in his head, you call the cops and have him throwed off the property. You understand?"

The teenager looked at me with sturgeonous half-brooded eyes, then meandered across the living room. I was helpless and we both knew it. Any words bolder than sign language or a whisper could be construed as harassment, a threat to the renter's well-being. The police would not only "assist" me off the premises of the unpaid rent, I'd be charged with even threatened, until someone crushed my skull or peppered my chest with shotgun pellets, the police considered the problem a civil matter.

I'd begged to lower my voice.

"Listen, don't mean to shout," I said in a sarcastic whisper, "but when you moved in, you said you wanted to buy the place. You begged me to let you buy the place, once you finished remodeling your house over in Albany. Yel, you bounced a check on me last month and I haven't."

"There was a screw-up on Buck's check. We already explained that." Her eyes had become bright little beads.

"That was last month."

"Phone the cops, Billy. I'm not going to stand here and listen to this."

"Buck said, 'I'd definitely' poking my finger against my palm for emphasis, 'have the money by the end of September' even if he couldn't get the disability thing straightened out."

I tried to get angry, but listening to the teenager mumble in the kitchen, I suddenly felt weak and hollow.

"Here it is almost November, and you still haven't paid. I drove over to that place in Albany. The work hasn't even been started."

"Buck's back dared up again. Why do you think he gets disability? At least you're well enough to work. And now he's got pneumonia. Temperatures between hundred and a hundred and six. Can't even talk. He's so sick I just got out of the sickbed, myself."

Buck. The nickname Al. Buck and his ability to sucker half a dozen government agencies for handouts of easy money each month.

development with the Fensters.

Right on it. That meant a week and a seventeen dollar charge for the sheriff to deliver the notice, four to six weeks for a court date, another four to six weeks for a second and final date after the Fensters failed to show the first time. I'd either have to make the payment while all this was going on—and the Fensters lived free—or lose the money.

Things had been so much simpler when I was a renter. We'd always paid on time, kept the apartment neat, but if we'd had landlord problems, the worst we could have lost would have been our deposit. Less now meant total loss.

"You realize, of course, you'll never get a penny out of them for the back payments or the damage," Lindeberg said. He was a taciturn man with a ruminative, oily face and thinning hair. Virtually no knuckles just indistinctly in the flesh. He would doodle the entire time I was in his office. I imagined him with the receiver muffled between shoulder and cheek, his big sketching stick men and boxes "You can't garnish government checks, so hell keep collecting that social security and laughing in both our faces. Whatever possessed you to rent to that yoyo, anyhow?"

"He told me he has a bigger, a little rough around the edges, but most loggers are. He had cards, a resume, even his own business on pharmaceutical companies are screening out this stuff. So how else was I to know? None of the timber companies will give out Privacy Act and all besides, I figured if things went wrong I could put a lien on his house in Albany."

"You can. But it won't do you any good. Even if you do get a judgment against him, his lawyer will have him declare Homestead on that house so creditors will be able to touch the first twenty thousand equity even if you could force him to sell, which is doubtful anyway." Fool came through the line. Was Lindeberg drawing a boy-wonder wearing a dune cap? And about this check you sent," he went on. "The rent from Citicorp? What's that all about?"

"It's no good."
"Well, I can see that. But can't use it against Fenster to force him to pay Oregon law says you can't prosecute unless a check is drawn on a nonresident account. This account was still open on the date of attempted withdrawal."

The phone receiver was a three-dimensional grin in my hand. The school gymnasium, the roof for two hours after lunch—while the regular janitor climbed up on the roof to get the footbals down—the kids had kicked up there and to put in new furnace filters—I mopped and moved my chair to a cadence I couldn't shake from my mind.

*Map to the left
Map to the right
Stand up, sit down*

Fight, fight, fight

*Map to the left
Map to the right
Good God, Randy Prounne,
Aren't you a sight!*

I stayed late to look up after the kids' football practice, and arrived home tired and not from the labor but from the throbbing in my head. The gym had taken its toll: the aftermath had been worse. The cooks' principal had complained to Mr. Scoria, the principal, because I'd left on the gym floor when certain times. The ball dozen streaks I'd left on the gym floor were certain to give every kid in school a case of terminal dysentery. She intended to take that and other "unidentified matters" to a member of the school board. "I bet the poor stormtrooper slum shut behind me, Mary, hunched over the kitchen table, didn't look up. She was working on the checkbook and nibbling meatloaf with her fingers. I rolled in, kissed and kissed her hair. She continued staring at the check index her eyes dull. Her cheeks looked sallow and sunken. "We've got problems," she said.

"So we'll get something new" I looked at the meatloaf but suddenly I wasn't hungry.
"The Rigbys moved out. I phoned to find out why their rent was late the month and the line was disconnected. So I got hold of a neighbor. They've been gone two weeks."

I signed eagerly, though as a confirmed pessimist I should have been expecting the Rigbys would be leaving us. Our best tenants, the Rigbys had rented the little one-bedroom house over in Skyline. Rudy and prompt. With luck we could get it rented without long to much income as with all our places, the mortgage was just slightly less than the rent with taxes, insurance, and maintenance costs. we actually lost money each month. Every day a place went unrented was another setback.

"I don't like making calls like that, Randy." Mary's eyes were as cold as dirty, shaved ice. "When you got into this business you said all I'd have to do was some of the painting. You'd hire a high-school student to help you with most of the work. You said—" She broke off, biting her lip. Those eyes suddenly blinned.

"What? What? I say?"
"Nothing. Never mind. Here, I'll get your dinner." She lifted the Cornflake dish by the scallop handles and started for the oven. I touched her arm carefully. Not carefully enough. She uttered a cry, the dish crashed to the floor. "Jesus, Randy! She stood still for a moment, then she slowly knelt and began picking up pieces of ceramic and chunks of meatloaf.

"When I was a little girl," she said at last, as she placed a handful of ceramic and meat on the counter, "bill collectors were constantly pounding on our door. I used to hide behind the sweatbin and cover my ears while mother pretended we weren't home. When we were first married that's the one thing you promised. I'd

never have to worry about when people."

"They were here? Someone was here?"

"Phoned. The power company. They're going to shut us off Tuesday if we don't pay. I've figured and refigured the checkbook. One of us must have made a mistake. We don't have enough, no matter how you look at it."

I put my arms around her waist and patted her back. Then, smiling, I held up the brown envelope I'd been sitting on. "Disability check came this morning. I made a flourish of kissing the thing. She stood still again, my thin, mousey-haired, pudgosed wife, her shoulders so slumped I thought her heart would be pulled down. She gazed at the linoleum. "I had already added in that amount," she said.

I no sooner shut my eyes that night than the phone rang. Mother, calling from her home outside Portland. From the moment she said "hello, son," I sensed the anxiety in her voice. "Just wanted to know how things are going."

"Not well."

"But things'll work out," I said. "It'll just take time, is all."

"How much time?"

How the hell do I know? But instead steady voiced, "A while. I'm not sure, exactly. How're things going at the four-plex?" I had been especially proud of that place, my first renovating job during the worst winter Portland had experienced in ten years. I remodeled a building on the verge of being condemned. No heat in the building while I worked. But worth it; the place was beautiful. Had been beautiful. Six weeks ago the tenant in the upper left apartment had gone berserk, kicked in the kitchen plumbing, used God-knows-what to ram a dozen fist-sized holes in the bedroom and livingroom walls, and left for parts unknown. We now had water damage throughout the building—and the insurance company refused to pay.

Well, you know how Mr. Lineberger said that according to state law we'd have to wait ninety days before we could remove that kook's furniture and other belongings from the premises? John and I put the stuff in the cellar. I mean, how else can we work in the apartment and get it rented? Now one of the other tenants has complained, and the Housing Commission has cited us for having a fire hazard down there. So what are we supposed to do, Randy?

I don't know. Put it back, I guess. We'll have to work around it somehow.

To tell you the truth, we haven't been able to do much removing anyway. You think you could handle it? Car sales are way down, forty, and when doesn't dare take time off from the doc. He's never seen it like this. It's his damn recession! Interest rates just keep going up and up. I don't see how we're going to make ends meet."

I wanted to assure her that eventually she was certain to have all her money back, hopefully with profit. But eventually, really, of finally, a sense that we'd lose everything before the buildings sold. I

sympathized with her complaints. I felt them as gouges upon my soul. It was my fault she and my stepfather now had large house payments before she'd loaned me the money they'd owned their home free and clear. All that money sitting idle, tied up in equity, and meanwhile no way to pay bills.

I mumbled something about getting up to Portland next weekend, and about the economy turning around, all the while wishing I could put my head under the covers and stay there the rest of my life. I hadn't bothered switching on the light now the dark pressed in on me.

"Is this damn recession," she repeated before hanging up, and there was a tinge to her voice that spoke to me not as son but as adversary. Purselings, heartstrings everything pulled in tight.

"How things happened?" Mary said in half sleep. I lay looking into the darkness and hesitating to tell outside. "You don't want to know," though I needed desperately to tell her.

"Good enough." The bed sagged and groaned as she turned over. She gave a little huff, then her breathing started coming regularly. After several moments, "Honey?" Her voice sounded distant and hurt. I didn't answer. I watched tiny curlicues of light twinkle in the darkness. "Have you tried praying?"

"I always get a busy signal."

That night the dream brought laughter, and upon the storm winds a voice that whispered sacrifice.

The steady, rhythmic crunch of marching footfalls sounded in my ears. Then I could see a firebase on a dead-end hillback, the dual pronglike guns of eight M-42 tracks pumping Wump Wump Wump rounds into the dark Vietnam jungle. Wump Wump Wump. The noise was deafening. Yellow and purple explosions blossomed the twilight sky. Dark to dawn, fifty or sixty rounds in the minute, as fast as the loader could feed the rounds and sealed in the gunner's chair I could hit the foot, pedal. Our battery "accelerate" instead of "Fire" I could stamp that pedal very, very fast.

The night the cockoff came, a shell exploding in the overexposed tube and a piece of metal blowing sideways, severing my legs at the knees as neatly as a sharp axe, I burst into short sharp laughter before passing out. I swear I saw my right leg—bloody, grisly with shredded flesh, a bone sticking out—pricking against the pedal, trying to pump out another round.

The footfalls grew louder. WUMP WUMP WUMP. They stopped outside a bedroom window, a voice again whispered sacrifice, and I dreamed myself praying to a benign who lived among jungles of Vietnam and dark lord with yellow-purple eyes who in a lot of might had decided to count my legs among His casual theft. I'm not over, put my pillow over my head, and for the second night in a row couldn't keep from crying. The dream changed. They were there in my backyard, wreathed in Williamsite fog, standing around a brick barbecue. The Persters and their waggie, winning mutts, Lineberger, Mom and John, the fat cook's assistant

from school, Mrs. Rigby with her blond ponytail, a demented man with disheveled hair and a half-witted grin, other people. The fireplace looked familiar. Two legs covered with well-cooked, fatigue-green skin were slowly turning on the roasting spit.

The pillow and sheets were soaked with sweat when I awoke. Outside, the wind was howling, the branches of our scarecrow maple scratching against the roof. I could smell something burning then I realized Mary was in the kitchen, searing bacon. There was a pounding in the laundry room. WUMP. WUMP. WUMP. Probably tennis shoes in the dryer. I threw the blankets back, started to climb into the chair—and then, my hands upon the chair arms, stopped still, phantom pains suddenly flaring within my thighs and a feeling of hollowness, of being used and of being extraordinarily tired, dragging through me. I had a sense that during the night I had entered into some unvoiced agreement. I shook my head, but the feeling of owing didn't abate. Finally, angry at my unease, I plopped into the chair and, teeth gritted against the phantom pains, wheeled toward the kitchen.

Mary was staring at the wall and holding a spatula listlessly as the bacon and eggs burned. Her eyes looked sunken and glazed; she seemed unmindful of the smoke. She didn't bend to allow me to kiss her, just mechanically handed me a melmac plate, then turned the pan, dumping grease and all onto the dish. And then, after I'd started eating, "They were out there last night. I could hear their footsteps."

Something icy moved through me and I glanced up, a forkful of egg halfway to my mouth. "What was? Who?"

"Randy, the bill collectors I could hear them." She seemed to be staring as much through the wall as at it. "Out there in the rain." She came over and, flipping her hair back with a nod of her head, put her hands on my shoulders, massaging. "Don't go to work on any of the rentals today, Randy. Spend the day here. Maybe the storm will end. Then you can finish sawing down the tree, and tonight we'll build a nice fire. You know how chopping wood always relaxes you." Her massaging became firmer, more insistent.

The tree. A stump, actually. Though too delicately she always avoided using the word. I had already sawed up and buried the rest of the rotten cherry. Tree weed had taken out of the backyard.

"Please, Randy."

I shook my head. "Can't stay," and she suddenly stopped massaging. "Oh, all right," I said vaguely, but something was calling me, beckoning me to return to the farm and to the Fensterers. Something that wanted me to leave Mary by herself while the storm raged. "For a while, anyway."

Evening, and I still hadn't cut any wood. I stayed near the kitchen window, looking out past the brick barbecue to the woodshed, where my little McCullough chainsaw was waiting. The storm had subsided, a light rain was falling. A typical Oregon rain: a silky fog that mists in around a house and makes you feel isolated from the rest of the world. Mary sat in the livingroom rocker, her microwave untouched in her lap as she stared vacantly at the television.

even though she hated football, she watched USC trounce the Ducks, then dipped the channel to the Huskie game. The hollow sensation haunted me. Something had been given me, and I was to reciprocate. I was sure of it. But what gift, and what tribute?

Darkness began filling up the spaces between the houses. Rid you of the Fensterers, I suddenly heard the shadows say, and the hollow feeling abruptly turned to anxiety. I looked at my hands and realized I'd been biting my knuckles.

"I'm going," I told Mary, and wheeled past her for my jacket. "Maybe the Fensterers' check came in." Mary didn't look up or reply. The Huskies had just scored; she stared blankly, her face without emotion. I kissed her cheek. "I'll be back soon." No response. I knew I shouldn't leave her. I glanced guiltily at the phone. A call won't do. Have to confront them, I thought. I heard someone tell me.

No lights showed at the farm. The torn-apart Buick and Mustang were there, the Impala gone. I took hold of the porch railing and pulled myself and the chair onto the stoop, pounded on the door until my fist chafed. I went back down the step and tried looking in some of the windows, but even when I raised myself to arms' length the sills were too high. I got my crutches from the van and wheeled through the mud to the back door, for which I had a key.

Grumbling from the effort, I climbed from the chair, hobbled up the stairs and, after fighting for balance while fumbling with the lock, entered the laundry room and flicked on the light. The Fensterers had moved out. Lines of rust-colored crud showed where their washer and dryer had been. Lint balls were everywhere. A dead rabbit lay in the corner.

The rest of the house was worse. Mud, food, dog and rabbit shit crusted the floors. Paths ran between the broken glass, broken pieces of furniture, piles of garbage. The kitchen walls were covered with grease, and human silt had been smeared on bathroom cabinets. The toilet was smashed, and the faucets were missing. Most of the light and electrical sockets had been ripped out. I hobbled from room to room, wanting both to cry and to kill. Then I entered the livingroom.

The wall-to-wall carpeting was pulled up, the antique etched glass in the built-in bookcases was torn out, the fireplace's marble and ceramic sides were gone. Head down, drained of energy, I sat down on the floor, my crutches across my lap, and felt some last part of me shrivel and die. What now? How could I possibly make repairs and keep up payments until the house sold? Give the place back to Mr. Muslim, and he'd be ruined along with me, not to mention Mom and John. All this, and there was nothing I could do to the Fensterers. Nothing I gazed toward the spiderwebbed ceiling and, with tears in my eyes, and laughed until my laughter became a cackling. And abruptly I stopped. A voice said sacrifice, and I realized rain was blowing against the window. Another storm. "Mary," I said aloud, and the room echoed her name emptily.

I sped back toward Lebanon. The road seemed to swim within my vision. Seventy. Eighty. Ninety. Ninety five. With luck, I wouldn't kill

anyone else if I smashed up. At least Morn, John, and Mary would be out of debt. If I insured from my head to my toe, the state trooper who pulled me over shook his head in disgust when I told him what had happened. "It's the times," he said, and gave me a sympathetic smile as he handed me a hundred-dollar ticket. His eyes had a yellow-purplish tinge behind the glow of his flashlight.

I found our house darkened. Mary in the hangarom, her rocker toward the wall. Fear filled me. I shook her. "The electricity's been turned off," she said, and continued staring into the corner. "You lied to me, Randy Brown."

I shook her again. She uttered a little cry, blinked, and jerked back slightly, as if seeing me for the first time. "They came on a Saturday?" I asked. "They gave us until Tuesday."

"I tried calling the power company, but they're closed today." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "Only the jinnem are working." She started slowly rocking. "Then Mr. Lunkabarger phoned. He went over to the farm this morning. The Fensterers were moving out." She turned, and in her eyes was an all-your-fault look. "They're planning to sue us, Randy."

"They're what?"

"For embarrassment at our having started eviction proceedings."

"Oh, my god!"

"That's not all."

I gazed at her in confusion.

"They said that you were harassing them last night." Her voice broke off. Tears welled. "That you were peeping in their bedroom window, while they were you know undressing for bed."

"Sure I was." I sat back in the chair, shaking my head in bemused exasperation. "All six foot three of me? I gestured toward my knees.

"They're going to the District Attorney, Randy." She wasn't so much speaking as trying to control a scream. "That's why they moved out; they're afraid of you." A look of frightened suspicion came into her eyes. "Lunkabarger says they have a paroloid of you at the window. At least someone who looked like you."

"Mary, listen to me." I latched her arm.

She jerked away. "Are you sure you weren't there last night, on your way home from school, or something?"

I stared at her in disbelief, my head pounding and my heart thudding so ferociously I thought my chest would burst. The phone rang, and I continued looking at her as I went to answer it.

It was Mr. Scotta, from school. "You apparently left one of the gym doors unlocked," he said. "Some kids got in and stole the basketball nets and all the volleyballs." Then, after a pause, "I think we better have a chat, come Monday. Mrs. Boywell has lodged complaints with the school board, Randy. I've remained her for going behind my back, but you know how she is."

"You mean about the streaks on the floor?"—my voice a rasp.

"That, among other things, Reports, for example, of your having dumped the mop water out in the gutter instead of down the toilet,

as the school board's health rules require."

"It, plugs up the goddamn thing," I screamed, and pitched the receiver against the wall. There was a clanging and then a buzz, but I scarcely heard. I wheeled past Mary and through the kitchen, knocking chairs out of my way. I went down the ramp, bumped across the yard to the wooded sacrifice. Something that demanded sacrifice? My flesh was lumping, my head and heart throbbing. I grabbed the chainsaw, started it roaring, and wheeled one-handed back out into the rain. All I could see was the cherry tree stump. The grass and other trees dissolved in quavering illusion. "Mary?" I called, stopping before the stump and setting my brake. The screen door cracked open, but I didn't turn. I now realized it wasn't necessarily Mary the thing wanted—whatever fate or beast or lord had taken my legs and now hungured for more. Grinning, I gripped the top of the tree stump above me. The streetlight looked a yellow-purplish bruise. My wedding ring of Alaskan nuggets glinted dully in the washed-out light, my ring finger still oddly bent from my having broken it during high-school football.

"They teach you how to make a tourniquet at that nursing home?" I yelled.

I don't know if she answered; the saw thrummed within me, filling my skull. *Crede a recession of your own. Make a sacrifice, and all is yours.* I giggled and, teeth clenched, looked into the slaty rain as I brought down the chainsaw's buzzing, anxious teeth across my wrist.

I remember agony, I remember awakening in a hospital room, green walls awash with light, an antiseptic stench as strong as smelling salts. Mary loomed over me, cool hand against my forehead, eyes filled with concern and despair. Then pain pulsed, a seething intensity that crept up my arm. I begged for drugs. "The doctor will be in soon," a nurse said. "Then well see if we can increase the dosage." I was trembling, and I didn't resist when my eyes rolled back, bringing a darkness splashed with nightmare. I saw a forest of legs, M42 tracers streaking into greenery, loathless and syphilitic and war-ravaged Vietnamese, the Fensterers hugging one another and grinning, marching arm-in-arm at the head of an endless column of laughing people, all of whom I hated. Light came and went, another day passing, and in a moment of semi-lucidity I heard Mary whispering to ten thousand for loss of a hand? Is that all? The amount would be enough to repair the farm and keep payments up until the place sold, probably enough left over to get the four-pix fixed. She sounded better, her voice no longer edged with hysteria. I wondered if she really believed the dismemberment insurance was the reason for my having cut off my hand.

Sleep again overtook me, a wonderful emollient sleep. Then someone, or something with long fingers scratched against the hospital window or my soul, and giving myself up to that hand I felt my self slide from me and gaze down smiling and powerful upon my sleeping, stilted form. I floated through town, then out across stubby fields of

winter wheel, and calls until I reached Albany, finally found myself walking stealthily across a carpeted floor of a ramshackle two-storyed house. Yelps, whimpering, a scream, the sounds of gagging and of a backsway grinding against a bone filled my dreams and delirium. I smelled blood and feces and, exulting, I laughed-laughed along in my sleep. Mary told me later, and in my nightmares the long line of people I had stopped marching and looked up, their grim grins shining to horror. The shadow overpowered the Fensters and came onward.

At last I awakened fully. I lay counting the dots in the ceiling tiles, counting the hours until my release, counting the pain pulses until I lost count and started over. I refused all company but Mary, and discovered I was unable to talk even with her. Words would have diluted my pride, and angry pleasure. Returning home five days later I smiled a malicious smile, my eyes bright, as Mary closed the bedroom door and told my mother and stepfather I wanted rest and to be alone. They left, then, and the next morning Mary left for work, kissing me goodbye and running outside to catch her ride. I was up and dressed and in the van in fifteen minutes.

I drove like a demon toward Albany, my reflection in the van's windshield staring back with hollow-eyed glee as I struggled one-handed with the controls. I streamed down a housing cul-de-sac and plowed through the briars and the picket fence in front of the Fensters' house, pieces of wood flying into the air and the van sliding to a stop across the tall, wet grass. The front door was locked. I found a crowbar in the garage, beside their Impala, then bashed off the knob of the back door and slammed the door against the wall. Turning and then tilting the chair, I gripped the jamb, climbed backwards up the stoop and wheeled across the kitchen, leaving tracks on the linoleum.

The house was in tumult. Furniture was overturned and smashed, water poured from the kitchen faucet, and, the sink filled, ran across the room and down the heat, vent, books and broken ceramics and garbage littered the floors. Back, Fenster lay in a pool of blood in the hallway, among strangled puppies and rabbits with their necks broken and eyes popped out. He was slanting toward the ceiling, his arms outstretched and head tipped back. The gaping slit across his throat, gaped at me. I rolled past him, laughed when I found the boy in the front entryway. Wide-eyed, he was leaning back against the side of the stairs, his head thrust between the vertical banister-spindles, his monkey wrench dangling from his lower jaw. Lines of dried blood went from the corners of his mouth, down his neck and into his shirt. Someone had lightened the wrench onto his lower teeth, then ripped downward.

Judith Fenster was sprawled in the livingroom, her eyes open and bulging. Two live rabbits speckled out from beneath her blood-caked navel. A bloody handprint, the ring finger distinctly crooked, was on her neck. My handprint, I knew, yet, regardless of fingerprints, once the time of death was exactly determined I'd have the world's best alibi. I leaned down, lifted the dress and shooed the rabbits away. Her legs had been chopped off at the knees. I found set like logs in the fireplace, a backsway on the hearth, the mantle and ceramic slabs from

the farm laid out close by, ready for emplacement. I smiled when I saw the bootprints that went across the carpeting and toward the front door. The blooded waffles looked like cherwon, the waffles of army jumpboots. I prayed, then. Not to a being who was always busy, who kept me on hold, but to that dark divinity who had visited me in dreams, a god with strong animal legs and cloven hooves and a taste for terror.

Please, Lord, don't let the Fensters be the only ones.

5

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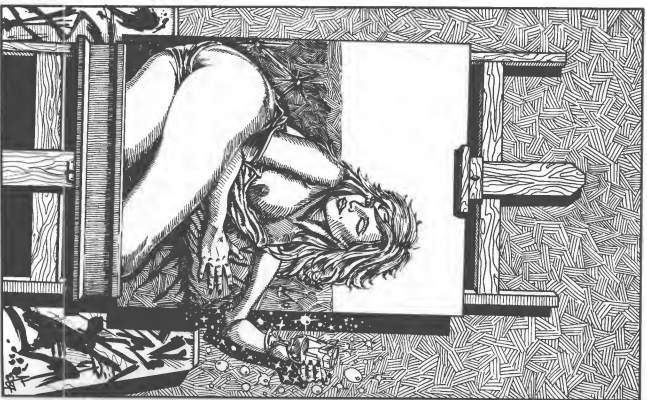
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MASTERPIECE

Anke Kriške



The delicate oval face, the straight nose, the high cheekbones, the way the lamp light caught her blond hair and made her green eyes sparkle: she was perfect.

Carl Ayer put the final strokes of gold in her hair and stepped away from the life-size painting. At a distance she seemed alive, as if she could rise from the blue velvet couch, discard the thin silk robe that matched her eyes, and walk into his fantasies. Ayer smiled at that. The woman who had been the model for this work had inspired no such thoughts in him.

He dropped the brush into a jar of turpentine and for the first time that day, glanced at a clock. It was almost midnight. He cleaned the brushes and sealed the tubes of paint strewn across the scarred work table next to the painting, before stumbling half-asleep into the small spartan bedroom without bothering to take off his jeans or fisherman's sweater, he crawled into bed.

He drifted

in the dream, he walked through the cold dark studio to his painting. It glowed with its own light, beckoning him closer to the room he created, to enter and feel the warmth of a summer sun, and the luxuriousness of the Persian carpet, to be with a woman who was surely to faithful to life to be merely an image.

She blinked, like a sleeper waking. Her eyes beheld her hands, her garment, her surroundings. She saw Ayer, his black wavy hair, equine nose, compact athlete's body, and in his hazel eyes—rapture. She regarded him with grave curiosity.

"Can you hear me?" he whispered.

She tilted her head.

"If only I could hold you," he said, pressing his hands against the painting, yearning with every atom of his being for her. His hands passed into the painting, he stepped into the other room.

The carpet was soft under his bare feet as he approached the woman. He could smell her perfume, see each strand of her hair, feel a pulse in her wrist when he took her hand and set beside her.

"Do you know me?" he had given so much of his heart and soul to her. He had given color and substance to her with each brushstroke, contemplating her every moment he worked. She was his fantasy, irresistible, alluring. He bent over to kiss her and undo the robe.

And the alarm burst through his consciousness. He swore and threw a pillow at the clock. "What a time to interrupt my dream!" He pulled the cover over his head and refused to get up for an hour.

It wasn't only regret at having set the alarm for such an early hour that kept him in bed. His painting had seemed so vital to find her in the cruel harsh morning light, reduced to hues of white and yellow, red and green, violated his sense of the dramatic. Finally, with the utmost reluctance, he crossed the hall to the bathroom, shaved, changed and entered the studio.

"God!" Even surrounded by the debris of days of work—overflowing ashtrays and cold cups of coffee, paint splattered on the green linoleum floor—she stood as vibrant, sensual and seductive as in his dream.

"How could I have created this?" he asked with awe, retreating to sit on the disipulated brown couch. For the first time, he understood the lure of realistic painting. This wasn't simply a reproduction of nature, a process he'd always scorned. He had distilled all he loved about women to create an ideal as unique as any living being. Lined up against the drab walls, were his colorful abstracts in various stages of completion. Whereas only yesterday they were expressions of boundless freedom, today they were merely paint splashed on canvas.

"I never thought I could create a masterpiece, certainly not at twenty-six. I may never do anything better. You should have a name, something romantic. Celtic, maybe." He thought.

It seemed sacrilegious to produce a painting to stir the soul and yet have to worry about a bank account. The electric company, however, would be indifferent to his genius. They demanded money, which he earned by painting revilingly cute still lifes fit only for people who liked their wall decorations as bland as their lives. But today, with Rowena behind him, the colors flowed onto the canvases forms flourished beneath his brush.

That night, he dreamt again. "Hello, Rowena," he greeted her. "I've got so much to tell you about my ambitions, about the new talent you've awakened in me."

She looked at him with adoring eyes.

"You're more beautiful than any woman I've ever met!" He started to kiss her. He could feel her heart beat like a bird's, see the flush in her cheeks in a dream all is possible, and all permissible. He undid the robe and they made love.

Each night thereafter, he would go to her and she would be waiting, kneeling at the edge of the painting, trying to see beyond the small corner of the studio that comprised her view. He would describe his activities, listened to her words that mirrored his own, and love her until the faint glow of dawn would summon him from sleep. "Stay with me," she would ask, without fail. He could only shake his head and awaken.

Soon, the appointed day to visit the Boyston Street art gallery arrived. After stood at his work table, cutting canvases to size with a razor until the time the gallery opened. He found himself reluctant to

take Rowena there even though he knew the painting would bring him the acclaim had been longing for. He would be invited to give exhibits. All his art would sell at a higher price. He had to take her. It was all this dream business, he thought. The whole thing was getting too complex and obsessive for his taste.

He stared at the painting in the daylight, she was an excellent work of art. It was only his dreams that made her breathe. Very deliberately, and with more care than necessary for such a simple task, he packed his paintings.

As the late afternoon sun illuminated the skeletal easel where Rowena had stood, Ayer sat on the couch and tried to concentrate on the preliminary sketches he was making. Of their own volition, the charcoal lines would form Rowena's face.

He put the pad down. Denise Mckinnara, a gallery owner for the past twenty years, had been uncharacteristically impressed with his latest works, especially Rowena, who, she assured him, would make his reputation. He should feel elated.

But those two businessmen, as gray as their three-piece suits, stopping to leer at Rowena as she hung in the gallery window, had disheartened him. She was part of him, his soul, his...

"lover." The embodiment of an ideal, no matter how faultily conceived, he reminded himself, was still only an image of the mind. Ayer lit another cigarette. Leaving her in the gallery for a few weeks—he wouldn't sell her—would help him gain his objectivity.

He didn't dream of her that night. Nor the next few nights. Ayer would wrestle with the blankets, and in the morning when he attempted to paint, the brush was stiff in his hand; each stroke a parody of his previous skill. He had to have the painting back. Rowena alone gave him the magic and the mastery. Abandoning objectivity and rationally, he returned to the gallery and brought her home. Ayer drifted into dreams, minutes after his head hit the pillow.

joyously he ran through the studio to where Rowena stood in the sunlight.

She was not waiting expectantly for him. "Why have you taken me here again?" she asked, bewildered.

"This is your home," he stammered.

"I liked the other place."

"I missed you." Ayer took her into his arms. Didn't, didn't you miss me?" he searched her face for reassurance.

"I had only known you. There is so much more. The sky, trees that dance with the wind. Shop windows. People. Her face became wistful. "At night the lights would talk and couples walked together holding hands. I could hear them talk. I could see the drops and dreams in their faces." Rowena laid her hands on his shoulders. "Please, let me be a part of it."

"I can't do that."

"Why?"

"You're a painting, a thought retarded. He couldn't say it, couldn't wish he an inanimate object, not even for a moment. "You belong

with me. Here."

She pushed him from her. "You can't force me to see nothing but the interior of this room and the reflections of your mind."

I should have never left her at the gallery, he thought. All those new experiences were confusing her. She was so young. Soon, she'd forget. "I can make it up to you," he said soothingly. "I'll bring you flowers, and music boxes, and figurines to see. You'll be happy."

She turned her back to him.

He hadn't thought such a simple act could hurt him so much. "Listen to me." He grabbed her shoulders and spun her around. "It isn't as nice out there as you think. You don't know what cold is. You've never known pain. You wouldn't like what some of those people were thinking when they saw you. You wouldn't be *appreciated*, at best, not the way I appreciate you."

Her eyes blazed. "I haven't an existence apart from you? Have I no rights, other than those you decree?"

"I know what's best for you. I made you. And you'll stay where I want you to stay," he stepped back into the studio.

"Wait," she said, catching hold of his arm. "Please, please let me have more than this room."

She had reached out of the painting. He awoke in a cold sweat in the studio. Rowena appeared as he had painted her, except for her eyes. They were no longer focused before her but stared into the distance.

All morning he pondered his predicament. He couldn't send Rowena to a gallery; he'd lose her inspiration and companionship and be left with darkness. But she had escaped the confines of his dreams. What if she could leave on her own?

That afternoon he painted heavy chains upon her wrists.

"I have to do this," he said apologetically. "These are only temporary." As he looked into her eyes, they changed from sadness to anger. His own temper flared. "Why won't you understand? I only want things to be the same again!" he threw the brush on the floor and stormed into the bedroom.

He sat cross-legged on the bed and smoked until it was past midnight. Sleep, when he found it, was marred by Rowena's crying. Awake, he lay on his back, hands clasped behind his head, and worried that his obsession might cause him to destroy his masterpiece. For the fourth time, Ayer pounded the plow into a ball and turned over on his stomach.

Rowena's gown rustled close by.

"That can't be," he mumbled.

He was awake. Besides, he had painted the chains on her. He was reaching for the light when he felt the razor at his throat, and knew in that last moment he had left the turpentine on the table within Rowena's reach.

8

GIVE IT NO THOUGHT

Buzz Dixon

If a single word could describe the fat at thirteen Rue des Corbuns and its awful tenant, it would be *premise*. The room's angles, the dimensions of the furniture, the lachrymose arrangement of the few framed prints. All very *very* precise, as if they had been etched by a razor.

The tenant, a small very man of fifty, whose jet-black hair was precisely delineated by a streak of white along the left temple, sat in the exact center of the room. His two guests huddled across from him, while mice cornered by a boa constrictor.

A mauve gloved hand precisely removed a long slim cigar from his mouth. Carefully, he pursed his lips, contemplating the amount of ash. Apparently pleased with its length, he degraded to exhale a puff of smoke—not too large, not too small.

The young lady, not yet out of her teens, did not like this man. Why her father had brought her to this horrid little room, she could not fathom. All she knew was she did not like the man sitting before them.

"Madeline," said the man, "you are to be my mistress."

Madeline's hand flew up to her lips to politely stifle a laugh. The man's proposal was so shocking, that she found it amusing. They were living in Paris of 1915, not the decadent court of Louis the fourteenth. Men of power could no longer simply select a mistress at will.

Or *could* they? Madeline stole an anxious glance at her father, expecting to see outrage or bewilderment. Instead, he seemed impatient and on the verge of tears.

Confused, she attempted to parry the request.

"Madeline is too flustering, but I fear I am still in mourning."

The man waved his hand, showing in a single gesture how little he regarded the sanctity of mourning.

"I am well aware of the deaths of your brothers," he said. "After all, I caused them."

Madeline realized in an instant that he was *precisely* like a reptile: sleek and well-groomed, but dry and soulless.

"Monsieur thinks too much of himself," Madeline said icily. "Roland died from the bite of a rabid dog. Francois was shot down by the *Bosche*."

Again, an imperious disdainful wave of the hand. Madeline would never again think of that band without thinking of a lizard's claw.

"The manner of their deaths was selected by *myself*," said the man. "I can see you are dubious of my claim. Perhaps a brief history leading up to their deaths—and your presence here—will convince you. My name is Augustine Dupres. I was born outside the small town of Verdun. Mark that, name. It is not important now, but it soon will be. The chain of events I set into motion to wreak my revenge on that disagreeable collection of hovels will soon bear their bitter fruit. My mother was a dull peasant, moon-faced and addled-brained. She raised six children, most of them imbeciles. I was the youngest. My father—if indeed he was my father—abandoned us shortly after I was born.

"I tell you this not to elicit your pity, for your pity is the last thing I need or desire. Father, it is part of the explanation of how I discovered my unique talent and learned how to apply it. Ultimately, this will explain the deaths of your brothers and your present situation. Madeline sought some sign from her father, but he turned away in shame.

"Continue," she said. "Please, continue."

"As a child, I was markedly different from the others. Not because I was sickly, but because I *knew* more than they did. Often, I wondered if I were some sort of reverse changling, a prince of breeding left with a family of troils. As a result, my early life was hell. My siblings hated me because I wasn't fit enough to do the heavy chores with them. My schoolmates loathed me, because I was more cultured than they. My teacher, Madame Trigen, despised me, because she knew I was superior to her talent. It is with this spite that Madame Trigen that I discovered my latent talent. You see, Madeline, I can make evil things happen just by *thinking* about them."

Madeline frowned and glanced about the room nervously. Although clean and adequately furnished, it was Spartan. It reflected an utterly rational personality, one devoid of poetry.

"Forgive me," she said, but I can't help wondering why you didn't ask your people for a mansion or a palace."

"Madeline, please!" Her father's voice was edged with panic. More than anything this frightened her. He had always been her pillar of strength and courage.

Dupres smiled. Madeline was disappointed that a forked tongue didn't flick out.

"Your father is aware that I speak the truth," he said. "I have demonstrated my talent more than enough for him."

"As I said, Mme Trigen enabled me to make my discovery. From my first day in school, I hated her and wished her dead. But thinking as a child, I wanted her eaten by a dragon, or slaughtered by goblins.

"I wasn't until I wished for her to fall under a threshing machine that I made my discovery. In a matter of days, Mme Trigen, who was always unimaginative when it came to school

holidays, decided arbitrarily to suspend lessons for a day and take the class on a picnic.

"None of the adults in Verdun could understand why she took the class to a field that was still being threshed. I could understand it because I thought about her death. I *visualized* it. I shall spare you the grisly details, child. Suffice it to say, that her death was agonizing and horrible.

"I knew I was responsible and set out to learn the rules of governing my talent. What I possess, Madeline, is not magic, but science, malleable and heretofore unknown, but science nonetheless, not superstition.

"It took me twenty years to plumb the depths of my power. Anything I thought of *had* to be within the realm of scientific possibility. I can summon no ghosts or demons from my subconscious. The more complicated my desired result, the longer and harder I must think about it. I do not create events, but shape them."

"If what you say is true," Madeline said, "why don't you use your power for good, and end this dreadful war?"

Dupres laughed dryly. "Charming. Delightful! A truly innocent child. Madeline, I caused this war! I am using it to build my fortune and establish contacts. After the war, I shall dominate first Europe, then the rest of the world."

Again Dupres smiled with reptilian satisfaction.

"No more evil than your father, Madeline. He is a munitions manufacturer, no? Does not the war benefit him, and ultimately you?"

Madeline glared at him.

"The war killed my brother, Francois. That, and the death of Roland, have driven my mother to madness."

"An unintentional result, but rather an interesting one, don't you think? I shall remember it and use it in the future, against other enemies."

"Evil all you ever think about?"

"Evil is all I can think about. I have tried neutral and even good thoughts, but have never obtained any result."

"Perhaps you didn't try hard enough. You have spirit, child, but don't abuse your youth."

Madeline shivered as Dupres glared at her.

"For whatever reason, evil is all I can influence."

"Even so, my fortune rose quite rapidly. I eliminated business rivals, ideological enemies, and influenced the politics that will shape our world."

"Money soon lost its allure. Power is all I seek, and this war shall deliver me power as no man has ever possessed."

"Your father can help provide me with such power."

"Never," whispered Madeline, but she was no longer sure.

Dupres ignored her.

"I approached your father some months before the hostilities began. Of course, I had been thinking of this war for some time. Your father, quite logically, thought me a lunatic. I expected as much, and was perfectly willing to give him a demonstration of my

power.

"You remember Monsieur Chambord, a former competitor of your father? His heart attack was of my doing. The fire that claimed another competitor, Monsieur Berrin and his family? I thought of that. The proof was simple. I told your father precisely what I would do before I did it. Still, he would not believe."

"I was unable to alter my choice, war was on the verge of breaking out and your father, fool that he is, had what I predicted. I helped him profit from stock market fluctuations that increased his wealth five-fold. I thought of the fire that destroyed the factory of his only major competitor, making him the numismatic king of France. He knew I was doing these things and he invested and made money accordingly. Yet, he tried to deny any obligation to me."

"You recall your obligation now, don't you, Monsieur? Twice in the last year, Madeline, he denied what was rightfully mine. I killed your two brothers because of that. I thought of Roland being hit by a road dog, but not knowing it was Roland I rather enjoyed thinking of his painful mortification as he died. There was a subtle cruelty. I thought of his airplane on the several hundred feet in the air. Did you know he had a choice of burning or jumping? How I wondered what his last thoughts were. Agency, the flesh was seared from his body? Or, perhaps despair, as he fell?"

Madeline rose abruptly and walked toward the balcony that overlooked the Seine. It was a bright crisp October day in Paris but her heart felt as cold and inert as a lump of grey mud from the trenches.

"Wonder no more, Monsieur Dupres," she said at last. "Francis jumped. He did not burn."

She turned to study both Dupres and her father. Her father was the physical opposite of Dupres, a big bear of a man with bushy grey hair and beard, yet he seemed completely covered by the smaller man.

"You are a despicable man," Madeline said, "to take advantage of my father's distraught state. You are mad, Monsieur Dupres. Mad and evil."

"Madeline! No! Don't antagonize—" Her father was cut off by Dupres' thin ebony cane tapping sharply against the floor.

"You do not seem to appreciate your position, my child," said Dupres. "I hold sway over you, your father, your mobster, the entire world just by thinking evil thoughts. I can bring them about."

"The evil eye?" asked Madeline, circling him, studying him.

"That is that what those loathesome peasants, the Italians, call it isn't it? Yes."

"Dedicated only to evil?"

"Only to evil, child. That which is vile and destructive serves me very well, indeed."

"With such power, you could have any woman in the world," Madeline cooed. "A woman far more experienced than I. Why do you want me as a mistress?"

Dupres smiled like a cobra anticipating a feast.

"I have had other mistresses, three to be exact. But knowledge of the flesh brings corruption of the soul. They sought to use me. I do not permit women to use me."

He smiled again, and tapped the neat gray ash off his cigar.

"All three are dead now. Consumed from within by cancer of the female organs. I thought of that," he added with a dry chuckle.

"That still does not explain why you chose me," Madeline said, still circling.

"I selected you for two reasons," Dupres said. "First to humiliate your father for his reluctance and to obtain a hostage for his further collaboration. Second, because I have certain specialized physical needs. Needs best served by one young, fresh, virginal. Unmarked, you might say. Unmarked, as of yet."

Madeline's father moaned and covered his face with his hands as he wept in open shame. Both Madeline and Dupres ignored him.

"You make a grave error," said Madeline, "in confusing innocence with ignorance, and lack of experience had just sensed a mongroose."

Dupres smiled, fattered the cobra had just sensed a mongroose.

"Are you Jean of Arc?" he asked, barely able to conceal his smug.

"Perhaps," said Madeline circling. "When you think of a sin, it comes true, no?"

Dupres nodded, keeping an eye on her.

"And what sin," asked Madeline, "is more evil than suicide?"

Dupres expression darkened. A lethal and evil smile crept across his face like a snake slithering over a tombstone.

"A clever ploy, but one doomed to failure. You must make me concentrate on a specific form of death, not death in the abstract? The fires of Hell lick at your body, Monsieur Dupres. Sweat forms on your brow already. You feel discomforted, no? God's judgement on you shall be very, very hot!"

"There is no God," said Dupres. He sounded unconvinced.

"My father saw to it that I had a very liberal education," Madeline continued. "All the classic French novelists and playwrights, plus a few English ones, as well. Tell me, Monsieur Dupres, have you ever read Charles Dickens?"

"I have no time for such nonsense."

"Oh? Then I take it you never read his *Black House*? Monsieur Dickens reports a very rare but scientifically verifiable phenomenon in that book: spontaneous human combustion."

The color drained from Dupres' face. Madeline went on.

"It is the exceedingly rare, but historically proven, burning of a living human being for completely unknown reasons. Monsieur Dupres, without warning, at home or abroad, at work or at rest, the poor victim will simply burst into flames. Very mysterious, but very real. A fact, Monsieur, a scientific fact."

"I'll kill your mother," Dupres said. "Your father, too! I'll give you a thousand dread diseases."

"I think not," said Madeline, kneeling beside him. "You would have to think about killing us, which means thinking about why you

want us dead, which means thinking about spontaneous human combustion, which means, thinking of *yourselves* bursting into flame!" Dupres looked horror stricken.

"Damn you," he hissed.

"No Monsieur Dupres. Damn *you*. Damn you in the everlasting fires of Hell. Feel the heat welting up inside of you. Think of the smoke filling your lungs from within. Think of your bowels steaming and sizzling from the internal heat.

"Can't you just see your heart bursting open like a roasted chestnut? Can't you imagine the exquisite agony of your brain frying within your skull?"

With a shriek, Dupres bolted from his chair and retreated to a corner, his back to Madeline. He covered his ears with gloved hands

"Quiet! Be quiet! Leave me alone!"

Madeline smiled and picked her wrap from the table.

Dupres moaned in the corner. Already, thin wisps of gray-white smoke curled up from his collar.

"Farewell, Monsieur Dupres," Madeline said. "Try not to think about it."

Flabbergasted, her father watched her go out the door and down the stairs. Dupres sank into a sobbing heap in the corner, his precision gone. Madeline's father hesitated only for a moment, then ran after her.

He was down the stairs and onto the street when he heard the rush of flames and Dupres screams. He and several passers-by looked up at the flat's balcony.

The room was filled with oily black smoke. For a moment, nothing could be seen, then the doors burst into a thousand shards as Dupres crashed through them.

He seemed to be a marionette made of live coals and jerked about by strings of flame. He screamed at this dreadful apparition. Two men ran to summon the fire brigade. Madeline's father smiled in joyful relief and ran after his daughter.

He caught up with her at the next street corner.

"Madeline! You were magnificent! I am so proud to have a daughter such as you!"

She winced and slipped him with all her might.

"The man who profits off death, allows my mother and brothers

to go unavenged, and then betrays me," she said, "is not my father!"

BUILT IN 1710 R.C. Tuttle

Lucy Barnett, looking quite attractive despite the summer heat of Claydon, Connecticut, eyed the chubby real estate agent.

"When can we move in?"

Her boyish face, lopped with shoulder length dark hair, was all business. Sam Balster shrugged. "Any time, of course there's a lot of work to be done on the house to make it fit to live in. After all, it's over two hundred years old!" He grinned. "Is your husband good with tools?"

She laughed and acted that momentarily subducted ten years from her thirty-two. "My husband is a college history professor and he has trouble opening a window. I'll take care of the repairs."

"You're a carpenter as well as a writer?"

"I've painted a shapely finger at him. "You're making fun of me. No, I will hire the proper people for the job."

She smiled. "No one has lived in it for a long time ever since..."

He turned serious. "No one has lived in it for a long time ever since..."

"My Aunt Mary," she interrupted, "died in the house. I'm told there was some sort of a day care center there for awhile."

"Yes, but no one has even spent the night there for twenty years."

"Tonight will be a first. Look, Sam, the lawyer told me the estate was settled and the house and property are mine. Give me the goddam key!"

He sighed and handed her the set of two keys. "I have to tell you that a local developer will pay you anything you want for the property."

She stuffed the keys in her purse. "I'm going to fix it up, live in it, and do my writing there. My husband can easily drive to his college."

"He's with you?"

"He's in England for a couple of weeks, lecturing. "She rose and brushed the wrinkles out of her checkered skirt. "You know of course that my great Uncle Jason built that house in 1710?"

"He killed a lot of women in that house."

"I know," she said. "His first three wives cut them up with an axe and buried them out behind the house. Then, he married an older woman who claimed to be a witch and their favorite hobby was to

lure young maidens into the house to their death." She took a breath. "I've heard variations of those stories since I was a kid. Don't forget, Jason's sister-in-law who was killed around 1793."

"How about your Aunt Mary? Fall of 1960 when she came to live in the house and she was just like you, tall, sexy, good looking and full of self-confidence."

"Thank you, I think," smiled Lucy.

"The day care thing had moved out and she fixed herself up with a cot and two days later, she was found in the storeroom with her head split open. I was a kid then and my old man was a town cop. He told me he had never seen such a mess. The talk is that old Jason killed her like he killed the rest of the women. I can't explain it but, somehow, he still lives in that house and doesn't want anyone else, including relatives, living in it."

"There's something you should know about my Aunt Mary," Lucy said. "She had a habit of inviting strangers into her home for one night of love. My theory is that she just invited a kook in that night."

"That's what the police thought but—" He struggled. "She just had a cot and just before supper she was seen out in the back yard clipping bushes and one of her neighbors was in her kitchen for a few minutes around eight—no one else was there." His round face was solemn.

"Sam, are you trying to scare me? I write horror stories. Remember?" She glanced out the window at the passing traffic on Main Street. "I've heard all the tales about Uncle Jason and his witchy wife appearing in the house—and frankly, I don't believe them." She paused and pursed her lips. "Let's say I need proof: is the electricity on?"

He nodded. "And the telephone is working. No bed in there though."

"I have a sleeping bag. What kind of a stove in the kitchen?"

"An old wood range and a gas stove. No rebcoy."

"I'll buy one." She eyed the little, bald headed man behind the desk. "Sam, do you really believe that stuff about Uncle Jason's ghost?"

He shook his head slowly. "I don't know. I remember, when they were settling your grandfather's estate, I had to go in the house around ten at night to get something—forgot what—and when I was standing in the hall just off the kitchen, I got the damndest feeling that I was being watched. I looked up to get out of there." He frowned at his desk, then looked up. "You remember old Doc Erikson—retired stink? He's around eighty and is a ghost but he lives a couple of houses up from the Wellington house. He'll probably drop in on you. In fact, he was talking to your Aunt Mary just before Jason got her."

"I vaguely remember Erikson." She flashed a smile. "See you tomorrow."

"I hope so," he said glumly.

The Wellington house was a stark white, two story building facing Miller Street which, curved around, paralleling the railroad tracks for about a hundred feet, then took a sharp left through a tunnel under

the tracks and into Clayton's Main Street, part of the historic Boston Post Road. Built in 1710, the house was somewhat smaller than today's average two story house and had a long, narrow front porch facing the road and about a half acre of a grassy back yard with a huge oak tree, shrubs and several smaller trees. An unpainted picket fence enclosed the property, part of it along a sidewalk, and there was a barn on the right. In Jason Wellington's day, the area in back of the house had been all virgin woodland while the town, about a quarter mile away, had been a tavern and a few houses lining the Post Road, a mile on the other side of town lay Long Island Sound. Through the years, the town had expanded in all directions, filling the area between Main Street and the Sound, and Miller Street with residential homes and a factory. Most of the Miller Street homes were vintage 1900 to 1930 so Jason's saltbox blended nicely into the area.

She drove slowly into the driveway, stopping in front of the barn. She slid out of the car and after pulling out a suitcase, went to the back door, unlocked it and stepped into a musty smelling kitchen. There was a fireplace with a Dutch oven on one side. The two stoves were on the other side and along the inside wall on either side of the floor there was a telephone on a counter under an array of shelves. There was another smaller door next to the fireplace.

She opened her suitcase and pulled out a pair of dungarees. Then, she slipped out of her skirt, revealing long, shapely legs, and pulled on the dungarees. After a moment's consideration, she took off her blouse and bra, and slid into a light sweatshirt. Might as well be comfortable.

She had bought some ham and cheese at the deli so she proceeded to make a ham and cheese sandwich, and then heated some water to make a cup of instant coffee.

She had done some research on the house, so she learned against the counter, munching her sandwich and read through her notebook.

Uncle Jason's house, known in colonial time as a "Two on Two," was built of oak clapboard and hand hewn oak timbers originally joined together by mortar and tendon with wooden pins inserted for more strength. She looked up at the ceiling. There were four oak beams and here and there she could see a wooden pin—still there! When first built, there was a central chimney with the first floor fireplaces sandwiched in between two large rooms, one used as the kitchen and dining room and the other as a parlor. Upstairs, there had been two main rooms with a fireplace in each. A staircase led from the short front hallway to the second floor. Clutching her sandwich, she walked to the hallway and looked up the stairs for a moment, then after glancing into the room to her left, went back to the kitchen. Interesting, she reflected, as she read on. During the 1800's, a long porch had been added to the front of the house and no addition had been built just off the kitchen. During the war of 1812, the back yard had been the scene of a battle between some British sailors and 1900 punning had been added to the house and later electricity. The first floor parlor area had been divided up into two

rooms, one an office or utility area and the other, a storeroom which was probably the only truly original part of the house left with its fireplace, rough oak flooring and one tiny window facing the back yard. Legend has it that this was Jason's favorite part of the house. He would sit for hours in front of the fireplace, sipping ale and glaring in the flames. There was a door leading into the storeroom—Jason's room—from the kitchen and another from the utility room. The upstairs had been broken up into four bedrooms and a bath. Each bedroom had its own fireplace.

She closed the notebook and finished her sandwich. It was late afternoon and an August thunderstorm was rumbling impudently in the North preparing to pounce on Clayton. She grinned weakly. That's all she needed was a thunderstorm for her first night in a haunted house where so many had died violently—Jason's wives, young girls, Aunt Mary—. There was her great Aunt Hannah, Jason and his evil wife had disappeared after their first killing. The house had been taken over by Jason's younger brother who had joined the Confederate Army in 1776 and had been killed in 1779 during the Battle of White Plains, leaving a wife, Hannah and two sons in Clayton to carry on. In 1779, Hannah had been found backed to death in front of the fireplace—in Jason's favorite corner of the house—as was Aunt Mary.

One thing she was sure of—George Washington had never spent the night in this house as he apparently had in every old house along the Post Road from New York to Hartford. Old George knew better.

She pushed the notebook aside and dowered the rest of her coffee, then went outside to the car, pulled out her sleeping bag and the rest of her luggage, deposited them on the kitchen floor, and armed with a towel and soap, went to take a shower. The bathroom was small and the shower seemed to be working, although the water pressure felt something to be desired. She stripped and stood a moment, a bony, slender figure of a woman, and then took a quick shower. No hot water.

Fifteen minutes later, feeling refreshed, she went back downstairs to the kitchen and put on water for coffee. It was almost five o'clock and she had brought a can of soup for supper. That and another ham and cheese sandwich ought to do it. She went out the back door and stood, a slim, attractive figure in dungarees and a sweat shirt. Claps of thunder were coming out of the North and she could see an occasional flash of lightning. Black clouds were gathering. For all that, she considered going to a motel for the night. No damn it! This was her home! She went back into the kitchen, made herself a cup of instant coffee, and then stalked into the front room and spent a few minutes trying to decide where to put her furniture when it arrived. The room, despite its antiqueness, seemed to be looking back at her as though trying to decide what to do with this foreign invader. Sam was right. It was creepy! She took a damp towel and walked into the hall, then into the bare utility room. She watched

several cars go by on Miller Street, then opened the door to the storeroom—Jason's area.

The dim light from the small rear window revealed a trunk in one corner, a few empty beer cans and an old chair by the fireplace. The oak flooring was surprisingly clean. There was a light socket hanging from the ceiling but no bulb.

She walked in, opened the other door, glanced in at the kitchen, and then put her hand on one arm of the chair. She examined it closely and realized that this chair was indeed an antique—must be very old—perhaps around two hundred years! She ran her fingers over the scroll on the back—ram's horn curl—typically Colonial.

A sudden chill ran up her spine. There were angry vibrations in this room. Shaking off the feeling, she went over to the trunk and clearing the top of empty boxes, opened the heavy lid and looked inside, half expecting to see a dead body or something equally as gruesome. Instead, she found it was empty except for a few scraps of paper and some dirt. The anger around her persisted however, and she felt uncomfortable—a little frightened.

"Damn you, Uncle Jason!" she exclaimed, and then grinned sheepishly. Talking to herself! Her coffee was cold so she dumped it into the fireplace and went back into the kitchen.

Then, she realized that she was drenched with her own sweat.

Angry with herself, she slammed the storeroom door shut, got some tan shorts and a blouse out of her suitcase and after putting them on, stood staring at nothing in particular. For an instant the notion of a modern motel room with hot shower, snug bed and TV set appealed to her. There was a nice motel about three blocks away.

Then, she glanced impudently in the general direction of the storeroom. "No! You aren't scaring me out of my own house, you son of a bitch!"

She looked out the window. The thunderstorm was overhead and ready to break. After a supper of canned clam chowder and a toasted cheese sandwich, she set up her typewriter on the counter, braved the rain to get an old packing box out of the barn for a chair, and put a sheet of paper in the typewriter. She then got the rough draft of her latest story out of the suitcase and quickly read through it. Oddly enough, it was about a house that had turned on its owner, dealing out death and destruction. She sipped her coffee thoughtfully. Maybe that damn plot was running through her mind and had her imagining danger in this old house. She typed her name on the upper left hand of the page, and then continued on with her rough copy.

Mary could still hear the thumping in the attic as though children were running around, playing a game. The noises in the rest of the house had been replaced by the normal creaking of the old building as it leaned against the strong offshore wind. She looked at her watch, wishing her husband would hurry home. She could hear the distant surf and an occasional car on the

highway. There was that noise in the front room again!

Her fingers paused on the keys and glanced out at the rain filled sky which was black and dismal, an atmosphere that seemed to be invading the house. Lightning streaked through the clouds, leaving thunder crackling in its wake, and Jason's house, as it had done for the past two hundred years, braced itself against the sheets of rain.

An icy chill trickled up her spine. She had the feeling that eyes were watching her. Maybe another cup of coffee—She turned slightly and saw it! A vague apparition of a grinning woman in a long dress was standing in the store room doorway beckoning to her.

This was crazy! How many evenings had she spent talking and laughing about her horror stories with other writers? The creators of fictional horror enjoyed scaring Hell out of their readers. Now, she was feeling the fear of this impossible apparition.

Jason's wife? The self-acclaimed apparition. The figure was floating a few inches off the floor and the flimsy mouth seemed to be forming the words, come—come. Outside, the storm grew more intense, filling the kitchen with the glare of the repeated lightning flashes and rumbling of thunder. The thing wanted her to come into the store room. Why? According to the old wives' tales that had survived the years, Jason's wife would lure potential victims into the house and Jason would axe them to death. Was this what happened to Aunt Mary? Aunt Hannah? Her?

Despite her fear, she had a terrible urge to go into the store room. She was trembling, not so much from fear, but from expectation. She slid off the box, paused, then walked slowly toward the room as the apparition, still beckoning, beckoned into the room as she approached. She reaching the doorway and stopped an instant, then stepped into the room.

A wave of dizziness sent her feeling into the darkened room. When she regained her equilibrium she found herself against the wall facing the fireplace. The sounds of the storm were gone and a grim looking shaggy haired man with a long black beard was sitting in the chair in front of a roaring fire in the fireplace. The woman, clad in a long black dress was standing behind the chair, still grinning. She had long straight grey hair and a heavily lined, angular face. The trunk was gone, there were a few chairs, a table in the room and a long rifle over the fireplace.

A long, double edged axe was stretched across the man's lap.

She glanced out the back window and saw a clear day, and instead of houses and a factory, a paved backyard and a dense forest along the edge of the back yard. The store room wall was gone and she could see a dirt road out front, and the tops of a few buildings—no railroad! There was rough furniture in the front room.

The man in the chair dropped a newspaper on the floor and turned toward her. Welcome to the home of Jason Wellington! The notice was thin as though far away.

She looked down at the newspaper—something about the British

on the front page. This was impossible—she was back in the 1700s. These two looked real—solid—not ghosts! "Uncle Jason!" she blurted out.

He grasped the axe in his right hand and stood up, a tall man in rough, home made clothes, his eyes gleaming. "You have taken my house. No one takes my home away from me! He raised the axe and stepped toward her.

"No!" she cried.

The woman cackled. "Get her, Jason!"

The axe came down hard. Lucy leaped aside and screamed, then flinched as the blade brushed against her leg.

She regained consciousness to find herself on the store room floor and a grey haired man in a wet raincoat, wiping her face with a damp rag. The old, lined face was full of concern. "I was out on the porch knocking on the door and I heard you scream so I forced the door open I am Doctor Erikson."

She sat up and looked around. There was the trunk—the empty fireplace—

where did Uncle Jason go?"

Erikson helped her to her feet. "Back to his own world. I've been studying the activities of your Uncle Jason for years. I—met your Aunt Mary just before she died."

Lucy, almost a head taller than Erikson, nodded, then ran her finger over the angry, red scrape on her leg. "He almost got me!" She eyed Erikson. "That axe is real."

Erikson nodded and pulled a small bottle of whiskey out of his pocket. "Perhaps you need some of this. One of my hobbies has been ghost watching and I've found the whiskey to be quite helpful!"

She wiped her brow, then walked into the kitchen. "I'll make some instant coffee and we won't get into the kitchen. I'll make a lecture site given in New Haven about six years ago. "I'm glad you arrived when you did. Have I got a story for you?"

"First let me tell you what your Aunt Mary told me the day before she died!" He took off his raincoat and draped it over the sink. He was wearing slacks and casual shirt over a turtleneck. "She was bedeviled by those ghostly women to come into the store room, Jason's wife. I assume, "Then she said she started in but at that point, the phone rang and she answered it. After she had hung up, the apparition was gone and did not appear again that night. On the following night she was killed!"

Lucy quickly recounted her experience in the store room.

He listened attentively. "Somehow you were transported to a time when Jason and his wife were alive." He sighed. "How I would love to experience that—but I suppose that privilege is bestowed only on blood relatives, at least in recent years."

"Be my guest," she grinned. She felt relaxed. "I won't get a bill for this, will I?"

He smiled. "No, I'm long retired and besides, I'd like to get to the bottom of this Jason thing."

She looked out the window. The rain had dropped to a drizzle and the thunder and lightning had moved on. "Okay—what exactly should I do about this? It's quite obvious that he's going to try to kill me again."

"You either ignore the becoming lady," said Erikson, "or—take a gun with you to their world—and kill them."

She stared at him. "Kill them? Ghosts?" She made two cups of instant coffee, then added two shots of the whiskey to the steaming liquid.

He took his coffee and sipped it. "At the time that Jason is trying to kill you, he is not a ghost. For the life of me, I can't explain, can't even theorize to what is happening. I can only say that there are a few cases like this and in each case, the man or woman involved has met a violent death before their time. There was a Duke in England during the 1600's who was killed by a band of thieves. He was able to regain some semblance of life long enough to kill every member of the gang. Then, as the story goes, he attempted to kill his older brother who fought him off and plunged a sword into his heart. He simply disappeared." He eyed Lucy. "Have you ever shot a revolver?"

"Yes. My husband and I once belonged to a gun club. So, you are saying that I should return to Jason's world and shot both of them."

"Exactly. I have a revolver you can use."

She took a swallow of the coffee. "I think we're both crazy."

She walked back into the storeroom, sipping her coffee enroute. He followed and they both stood in silence, contemplating the bare room. She finally spoke.

"Do you think they are here now?"

He nodded. "There is a distinct possibility that our world and their world are co-existing in this house."

She glanced at him. "Now, that's a mind boggler—but, it does make some sense in light of what happened to me. Damn! I do want to live here and write. My husband will be arriving in about two weeks and will expect a relatively livable home."

"Let's go back to the kitchen," he said.

She followed him and a moment later, they were standing by the back door looking out into the light rain. The violence of the storm had passed.

She finished her coffee. "You still think I should return to their world and kill them?"

"Yes. Otherwise, they will continue to harass and—kill."

"And if I miss?"

"Hamburgen," he said with a thin smile. "If I stay with you, I don't think Jason will show."

She walked slowly into the storeroom, then returned. "Okay. Loan me the gun. I just put out a contract on those two."

"Why don't we go to my house and have a cup of real coffee," he suggested, "where we can relax and think. I have a housekeeper, an elderly lady who will see that we behave ourselves."

She smiled. "That's no fun."

"At my age," he said with a sigh, "there isn't much fun left."

Lucy returned to her house at exactly eleven-thirty, armed with a small but business-like revolver. She turned on the kitchen light and stood for several minutes staring at the storeroom door. Maybe her relatives wouldn't appear tonight. She felt a certain sense of fear but lingering in the back of her mind was the thrill of adventure into the unknown. The notion that she might be backed to death did not seem to be as important as her mission—to dispose of her unwanted relatives. She slipped on a pair of dungarees over her shorts, pulled off her blouse, put on a bra, pulled on a sweatshirt, and carefully slid the gun inside her bra.

She saw Erikson's bottle of whiskey on the counter and took a quick swallow. Not a habitual drinker, she gagged slightly, but the fiery liquid did feel good going down her throat. "Here goes," she said aloud, picking up her sleeping bag and walking into the storeroom uninvited.

The rain had stopped but the night was moonless and the sky was black. A steady wind whistled around the house. She had left the kitchen light on so the storeroom was in semi-darkness. She put the sleeping bag against the outer wall and sat down, leaning against the corner of the room. Damn! She was sweating again!

Her father, a World War II veteran, had once told her that the worst part of war was the seemingly endless waiting between battles. How true! The minutes ticked by slowly—eleven fifty—eleven fifty-one—eleven fifty-two—she finally took her wristwatch off and shoved it in her pocket. Come on, Jason—let's do it. Get your goddamn axe! Her eyes began to close involuntarily and she found herself dozing off. Her head slipped back against the corner of the room and she fell asleep.

She awoke to find herself flat on her back, staring up at the ceiling. She sat up and looked around—the fire in the fireplace, the rifle, a grinning witch of a woman standing behind the chair and leaning by the fire fending the small revolver. Uncle Jason. The axe was standing against the headboard.

She had returned to Jason's era and he had her gun!

"This toy," Lucy, laughed Jason. "You were going to kill us with it?"

"Defend myself," she returned. She saw the newspaper on the floor. The date was August 1957. "Uncle Jason, if you want to stay in this house, stay. But I want to live too—in my time. The twentieth century."

"No!" he roared. "No one lives in this house but me and my woman!" He tossed the gun in the chair and reached for the axe. "I could kill you with your toy gun but my axe does a better job." He grasped the axe firmly and stepped toward her. "Now you die!"

Frankie, she picked up the sleeping bag and threw it at the upraised axe, engulfing the double blade as it came down hard, barely missing her. She leaped toward the chair, grabbed the gun and slid back against the bed. "Wall," Jason, intimated, tore the sleeping bag off the axe and turned.

"Now! Die!"

She aimed and pulled the trigger just as he was raising the axe. The bullet ripped into his forehead and he stood for an instant, the axe poised in mid-air, then both crumpled to the floor.

The woman screamed in anger, picked up the axe and caught Lucy's second shot in the throat. She fell to the floor.

There was a flash and Lucy faintly. She awakened to the sound of heavy knocking at her front door. It was daylight. She was flat on the floor next to the fireplace in the store room. The gun was clutched in her hand.

The front door opened and Erikson rushed in, his face full of concern.

"You're unharned!"

She rose painfully. "I got them both." She picked up the sleeping bag. "Look at the rips in it—Jason's axe." She handed the gun to Erikson.

He examined it. "Two bullets gone—into the 1700's"

1707 to be exact."

He eyed her. "Why don't you get cleaned up and I'll take you to breakfast at our local cafe."

"Sounds good," she grinned. "Think they're gone, Doc?"

He shrugged. "Time will tell."

A week later, a trapdoor was found in the store room by some carpenters Lucy had hired. They opened the door and found a pit with the bones of a man and a woman, a rusty axe, the brittle remains of a 1707 newspaper which told of the escape of one Jason Wellington and his wife, and scattered shot from a frontier rifle. Also—two bullets from modern times. One of the skulls had a neat hole in the forehead, finds that drove the hideous butts crazy.

Lucy turned the store room into her writing room and wrote some of her best stories sitting in Jason's favorite chair.

Jason and his wicked wife were never seen again. However, on dark rainy nights Lucy could feel someone eavesdropping in the room. This miserable woman had taken his chair, his room, his house!

And she had taken his axe and kept that toy gun in her writing desk.

Just in case.

5

FINDER

Howard Sedbrook

A snatch of dinner conversation started it.

Denny's father leaned away from the table and combed the front page of the evening paper with his eyes, frowning in a way that Denny had seen before: it was the same frown Denny's father wore when he sat at his drawing board, telling Denny that he had "a ton of work to do," and then just staring at a blank piece of paper, doing nothing at all. Denny knew enough through trial and reproach to leave his father alone at those times, reading whatever it was he read in while, frowning just the way he frowned at the newspaper that breathless June evening.

"They didn't find that kid yet," Sam Follet said.

Denny looked at his mother and saw silent, sad lines bracket the corners of her mouth.

"I know," said Lydia Follet.

"What kid?" Denny asked.

"How long has it been?"

"Paper says three days."

"What kid?"

"My God, the parents must be going out of their minds."

"What a horrible thing."

"Mummy, what kid?"

"Nothing, sweetheart. Push up there and you can have some."

Denny looked at the steaming heap of something his mother called Terry—Yockey, Terry—Yockey oozed colors that he didn't think belonged in food, except maybe pizza with the works. It just didn't look like food a kid should eat, even if he was five now and could sit in a Big People's chair at the table. Denny nudged it with his fork. "Seanne Street" was still on television. Denny opened his mouth to ask to be excused when his father answered the "what kid?" question.

"A little boy wandered away from his yard and now they can't find him."

"Who can't find him?"

"His mother and father. And the police."

"That's why we always tell you to listen to us, and do as you're told."

"Why can't they find him?"

Denny's parents traded uneasy glances.

"They don't know where he is, Denny," his father said.

"You know what?"

"What?"

"He's probably hiding."

"If he is, then he should come out when his mommy and daddy call him."

"I always come when you call me, right?" Denny said proudly.

His father started to say something but his mother interrupted.

"Yes you do, dear."

She patted Denny gently on the shoulder.

"Superman and his Super Friends could find him."

"They could if it was make-believe," his mother said. "But don't worry. Lots of nice people are helping the mommy and daddy look for him. Now, come on, eat your dinner before it gets cold."

Denny began spreading out the Terry-Yackey like colorful clouds above the old blue barn painted on his mother's china.

"That boy should ask a policeman. If he's lost, he should ask a policeman for help."

"That's right," his father said. Then he looked past Denny at Lytha. "I have to be back at the office to look at the proofs by eight. It shouldn't take long."

His mother spread a long sigh between them.

"I would ask a policeman," Denny announced.

Denny understood perfectly the idea of asking a policeman for help if you're lost. That was the way they did it on "Sesame Street" and that was what the policeman that came to his pre-school had told Denny's class. The policeman wore a uniform and carried a real gun, and he showed a movie about a boy that got lost in the movie the boy asked a policeman for help. The boy was crying, something Denny knew he would never do.

Of course, Denny didn't bridge the gap between "Sesame Street" and the pedestrian-free, sidewalkless, wooded lanes of his neighborhood in Hempstead, where the smallest lot was over an acre and nobody ever walked anywhere. There were no street corners where street lamps made disks of light for uniformed "friends" to stand on. The police in Denny's neighborhood rolled by in late-model Chryslers, poking into the ditch once in a while with fuzzy white shirts of light, then rolling on without urgency. Denny didn't know that was called having "High Visibility."

"If I got lost, I would ask a policeman," Denny said.

"And you would never get in a car with anyone you didn't know," would you?" Denny's mother picked up his hand and held it tightly. He pulled but she kept a firm grip.

"I would blast the naughty stranger!" Denny wanted to show how he would reduce the terrible stranger to a smoldering heap with his blaster but his mother wouldn't let him go.

"Yes dear, but you would never, ever get in a car with a stranger, even if he offered you something." His mother's eyes were as fixed on him as her grip and at first he thought she was mad at him, but then he could see it wasn't anger that made the lines above

her eyebrows. He didn't know what it was, but it made him uncomfortable. "Never talk to strangers, either."

"Mommy, let go!"

"Promises, Denny. Never, ever!"

"I promise!" He jerked his hand out of hers. For a moment he thought she might come after it, she reached and hesitated, and something more to be said formed her lips. Then instead she brushed his cheek with her fingers and her face seemed to grow soft again.

Denny made a blaster with his hand. He drew a bead on a naughty stranger lurking behind the refrigerator. "Keeecoww!"

"Denny, eat your dinner," his father said from somewhere far away.

"I don't want any more. May I be excused?"

Denny's mother sighed again.

That night there was a "newsbreak" on television as Denny gasped in the Denny video glow, swinging a used wrapping-paper tube through the air like Darth Vader's light saber. Denny, whose favorite television was the commercials, would ordinarily have paid no attention to the news, letting it slide by as white noise, wind for his fantasy battle. But this time something hooked him before the pretty woman with the Oriental eyes finished her first economical sentence.

Denny's imaginary fogs melted into the carpet. The wrapping-paper tube made a hollow thud on the floor. Denny watched the picture change.

Police cars with winking lights filled the screen. A helicopter landed. On the slide it said "News 6", which Denny could read easily.

Next came a picture of a man holding on to a lot of dogs, a whole herd of dogs, all the same color and size. Denny thought he looked like the balloon man that walked through the streetside crowd during the Fourth of July parade in town, clenching his laughed leashes the way he was.

The woman spoke on and on over the fascinating flow of pictures. She described the way the men were searching the woodlands around the little boy's house, using the and that to try and find him, and how there was still no clue as to the whereabouts of little [Denny didn't catch the name], the son of Senator and Missus [another name]. Denny started, expressionless. The helicopter came back into the picture, with "News 6" neatly framed and focused before it lifted off and swung out the heads of men wading waist deep through black swamp water.

Denny heard the basement door open.

"Mommy! Mommy, look at this!" Denny turned and flagged his hands in the air. His mother, who was passing through with her arms bracing a basket full of laundry against her chest, stopped at once, instantly absorbed.

Denny turned back and a small-boy groan slipped from inside him. His lower lip started to jut. All the neat stuff was gone. The men, the police cars, the herd of dogs and the helicopter were suddenly replaced by the pretty woman and a picture of a boy. Denny was about to turn away when the hook sank in again. His eyes locked on

the picture of the boy.

It was a nice picture, much like the one that hung in the follet living room above the sofa, the one that Denny sat for at Sears dressed in a stiff new flannel shirt and tolerating his mother constantly furrowing his hair with her comb. The boy's eyes were bright blue and his cheeks were full and pink. His hair was neatly combed, just as in Denny's portrait. Denny followed the pattern of the boy's shirt, tiny white stripes on a field of brilliant red, and noticed the deep blue of his coveralls. The stripes went this way and beneath a gap-toothed smile and a light that was shining in, not on the face. Denny stared, and he felt his mother staring behind him. She was saying something so was the pretty woman on the television, but Denny didn't hear it through the sound of crickets singing, a sound that was thick like a comforter thrown over the night, a sound that you could both hear and feel as you stepped on the soft black earth, a sound so solid that not even the distant good-bye hoot of a diesel train could cut through it.

The eyes. The face. The smile with the black lost-tooth notch just to the left of center. The seacock wave of stripes on a shirt. The light inside the face, fading. The boy was—

The boy was—

Come

The picture of the boy was gone

Denny blinked. A MacDonald's commercial swan past.

Denny blinked.

Copier beats down the rushes. Stripes run this way and that. The face is the same only it's different.

"Denny, have you seen my keys?"

No red lights. They're there but you can't see them in the daylight with the sun so big and red. The face. It's the same and it's different. What's different?

"Earth calling Denny. Have you seen my keys?"

"Denny, answer your father."

Another blink. You deserve a break today, they sang. Denny's father was standing there in the room. His jacket was smooth and wet looking—

wet.

—like a pair of new shoes. The little boy was gone and the MacDonald's commercial gave way to *M*A*S*H* helicopters making their millionth landing on the same patch of dirt.

"Did you see?" Denny asked.

"Yes dear, have you been playing with your father's keys?"

Keys? Daddy's keys? There were four or five keys on a ring with a tag that meant something if they got lost. They were lost now. Lost in red and brown.

"Denny, I've got to be going. I'll be late. Have you seen my keys or not?"

Denny turned and walked to the sofa. The ground was much harder here, and carpeted. He poked his right hand through the cushions and groped. Then he pulled it out, jangling the keys.

Sam Pollet rolled his eyes and took them from Denny's with a thank-you that was really half thank-you and half scolding. He rubbed Denny's scalp with a wide fan of fingertips and bent double to give the boy a kiss. Denny, gazing back at the television, seemed not to notice. Sam kissed his wife on the cheek and then hastened out the door.

"Hello?" Denny?

Denny looked at his mother with long-distance eyes.

"Where in the world are you, Denny?" his mother asked, putting down the laundry and reading his vaguely blank expression as she sat the red and brown sofa cushions back in place.

Lydia Pollet smothered the evidence of her husband's breathing in two with a hand up to the shoulder.

"Sam! Wake up, Sam!" she whispered as loudly as she could. Her voice was paper thin and written over with fear.

Sam rolled. Before he could ask, she leaned close and hissed in his ear: "The front door is open!"

Sam blew up out of the deep double pillow instantly. Sleep trailed away like dry ice vapor. He held his breath and froze, silencing the rustle of the bedcovers. Lydia leaned toward him. She pointed out the bedroom door and down the hall.

"Look!"

Sam nodded absently. He could see. An accident of geometry gave his side of the bed a clear view down the bedroom hall, across a corner of the dining room, through a corner of the living room, and into the front hall. Standing full-tale in the moonish light, cast from the over-the-sink fixture in the kitchen was the naked edge of the open front door. Palm leaves in the corner of the living room wriggled. A breeze was eddied across the carpet, infiltrating the vulnerable center of their night.

Sam's thoughts were lightning in a storm of black fear. A gun. He remonstrated every dinner-party argument he had ever given against good and honest people turning their bedrooms into arsenals and watched desperately he could fill his hands with reassuring steel and lead right now. His pants. Why the hell had he thrown his trousers in the clothes hamper last night of all nights. The closet was closed and he lay under sheets in his shorts, feeling more naked than naked. Look, he thought of Robert Blake, cruising the halls of horror in livid black and white in the film, *In Cold Blood*.

"I'm calling the police!" Lydia said. She curled toward the bedside phone.

Now an absurd impulse struck Sam. He finished after Lydia to tell her to wait. The door could have been carelessly left open, or blown open in the wind and weren't they going to look like fools to some officer with more important things to do than—than what? save their lives?

Sam didn't move. Lydia lifted the phone from the cradle and began pressing the number. The Hempstead cops were quick, Sam knew. They kept a high profile, especially on this side of town, close to

the all-night Stop'n Go store and the I-43 access ramp that linked Hempstead to Milwaukee. Hempstead was a small town with a big police force and suddenly Sam didn't care how silly he and Lydia looked when it turned out that the door had dreamed up this little joke all by itself.

But the door couldn't open alone and it might be minutes before the yard was full of red lights, sweeping the front of the house, purging it of demons. And by that time he might be dead while some maniac helped himself to Lydia.

Sam rolled and slid out of bed. He searched the shadows for something—anything—to use against an intruder: a shoe to throw, a paperweight to make his fists lethal. The pin-neat master bedroom gave up nothing.

He edged past the big oak bureau to one side of the bedroom door. Looking through the crack between the door and the jam, Sam studied the hallway, an art deco extravaganza of black and white, shadow and light, both exaggerated and senseless. On the bed, Lydia stirred.

"Follet!" she whispered. "Sam and Lydia Follet, 1809 West Sugar Maple. Yes, yes I don't know. The front door is open! No, I'm sure he didn't." She put one hand to her dark hair and made a fist. Sam heard the electronic scratch of the dispatcher's voice, too calm, asking too many questions. "How soon before you get her?" Lydia asked. The answer made her tug the sheets closer to her chin. "Please hurry."

Sam edged past the door. Nothing moved. No sound came from the box of shadows outside. Nothing rustled the black crepe of the night. He studied the hall and what he could see of the rooms beyond. Then he glanced the other way toward the end of the bedroom hall where Denny would be sleeping soundly in his room.

"Jesus Christ!" he gasped.

"What?" Lydia cried.

Sam stormed into the open hall. Lydia flinched on the bed.

"Sam?"

He froze. Denny's night light painted his pallid face yellow.

"Sam, what is it?"

"Denny," Sam said aloud. "He's gone."

The first part had been the hardest. The sky was moonless and Denny had never been out of his yard on his own before. Denny had never walked this way and neither had the boy. It was a narrow power company access road not far from the end of Sugar Maple Lane. The weedy road ran adjacent to old steel train tracks. Denny's father told him it was the Chicago and Northwestern line. When Denny was smaller, the distant growl of night trains made him afraid. Not any more, though. He was a big boy now.

Denny reached the access road by following a bicycle path that intersected Sugar Maple Lane, a path that the county was considering making part of the park system, although Denny knew nothing of the politics of the trail he followed. He knew only that it led to the access road and access road led to the place he needed to find. The place where the boy had walked.

Just as light began to prowls the far horizon, Denny left the power company road. He waded through wet June grass that grew higher than his elbows and kissed his arms. Crickets jabbered fiercely, leaping out of his way. The world was colorless—the lazy rise and fall of the meadow, the sleeping trees, the low bands of scrub brush fattening themselves to angled here and there—all look "cartons" in tones that belonged to the black and white Three Stooges "carbons" Denny watched on Saturday afternoons.

Denny knew this was the way. He could see the boy's footprints pressed in the grass. He saw them clearly, as if they were made of the same glow-in-the-dark plastic as his Yoda mask, and he wondered why the little boy's mother and father hadn't seen them. Or the pilot of the "News 6" helicopter. They were right there in the grass, plain as a rat turd in rice, something Denny's father would say that would make his mother put on her mad-face and make Denny laugh until he got hiccups.

His mother and father would get up soon, Denny thought as he followed the glow-in-the-dark footprints. They'll dress and make breakfast and get ready for work. Denny didn't insert his absence into the picture, or the storm that absence had already created. Instead, he thought of his mother getting prettier and prettier in the mirror. He thought of his father rubbing shaving cream on his face, dabbing a point of it on Denny's nose and laughing. He thought of breakfast smells and Mr. Coffey's gurgly nonsense talk.

And he walked. He followed the footsteps of a little lost boy through tall grass as dawn grew pink beyond the trees.

Hempstead Police Chief Otis Berman was two days without sleep and bracing for a third. Sometime in the last twenty hours dinner had been a fistful of onion rings from the Rainbow Cafe and coffee. Hot coffee, cold coffee, coffee that tasted like diesel fuel. Berman guessed he had so much coffee in his system that if he did try for a snooze back at the station, he'd just vibrate off the cot.

The chief knew he could forget about food and sleep now, because the second worst thing possible had just happened. Another boy was missing. Lord, he thought, if the TV and newspaper people had been bad about State Senator Drevland's kid disappearing, they would land on him with a taste for blood when this leaked out. And he knew it would.

He had an hour. Maybe two.

"You a smoker, Mr. Follet?" Berman asked the father, pulling the last pack of yesterday's fresh carton of Luckies from his shirt pocket. Follet took one with a hand that quivered in the yellow glow of the front yard light.

"I quit three months ago."

"Good for you," Berman said. He lit them both up.

Lydia Follet stood beside her husband, her hand hooked around him. She stared at the chief, searching his face.

Berman didn't like the feel of her stare. Her eyes might have been the anxious fingers of a blind woman, feeling for a smile. They asked him for an answer he just didn't have. Concentrate on the

husband, he thought Berman didn't care what the libber's had to say. Times like this a man keeps his perspective. And right now Ols Berman needed everyone around him to keep a white-knuckle grip on their perspective.

"There isn't a minute goes by I don't appreciate what's happening to you folks," Berman said.

"He's got to be close by," Lydia said. "Please, if you just start looking from here at the house, I know you'll find him. He wouldn't go with a stranger. He'd never do that!"

"Yes man. But I need to know a few things before we start."

Lydia's fingers flexed on Sam's forearm; her nails scratched a pattern of red slashes. Sam Follet stroked his wife's cold hand. He said nothing. His asphalt driveway was clogged with marked and unmarked police cars. A blue van was easing onto the lawn beside the jumpers and the lamp post with the sign that said "The Follets," Policemen, in and out of uniform, waited in clogs of shadow for word from Ols Berman, whose weariness showed in the rifts and dunes of his face, whose steel and silver hair was slicked back in wide furrows made by fingers charged with worry.

"The fact is, I need your help," Berman said.

"Our help?" Lydia said, her voice thin and light. Sam cut her off. "Please, we just want one thing. We want Denny back. We already told everything to the dispatcher and again to your officer in the house."

"I know."

"My wife is right. He can't be far from here. The longer we wait—"

"Nobody's gonna wait any longer than we have to. But nobody's going off half-cocked, either. I have to know how things shake out before I send fifty men knocking over your neighbor's tomato plants, looking for your boy. Is there any chance he's hiding out somewhere? That he's just playing Huck Finn on you?"

"No," Sam said.

"He wouldn't—had never do that!"

"Did he get into mischief last night? Did you scold him or argue with him?" Berman asked.

"For God's sake," Lydia said. "He's just five!"

"There was nothing like that."

"You didn't have to punish him? Maybe he busted your prized golf trophy? Maybe he decorated his bedroom with one of your videotapes?"

Sam held up his hand before Lydia could speak. Her grip was mashing flesh from his arm. "I put him to bed last night," Sam said. "I read him his favorite book. He said his prayers and he said, 'I love you, Daddy.' Then I said 'I sure to him. That's it. No punishment. No beatings, chief. That's it.'"

Sam dropped his cigarette to the sidewalk. The taste had gone sour. He ground it to a gray smear.

"What are you waiting for?" Lydia demanded. "He could be hurt! He could be—"

An officer in blue with puffed eyes filled the doorway behind them.

"Is this what you wanted?" He held out a bundle and Lydia's breath hitched. Cooke Monster peeked out from inside the folds of a belted-up cloth, a cloth that belonged on Denny's bed beneath a crowd of stuffed "friends," a cloth that should have been tucked under Denny's chin, not torn from the mattress and crushed between the big hands of a man who would later call it an article from the missing boys' room on a report that would refer to Sam and Lydia's precious little love as the *alleged victim*.

"Jesus, Nate," Berman said as he pricked a thumb at the van parked on the lawn. The officer huffed, glanced at the Follets, then ducked out of the cone of light on the front stoop.

"You folks know the Dredlands?" Berman asked.

"Only by name," Sam said, rubbing the gooseflesh from his arms and staring after the officer crossing the lawn. "I'd know who they were if they came into my store."

"You know about their boy, then?"

"It's all over the television."

"That does that have to do with Denny? Their boy's been missing for—"

Lydia bit her lip.

"Did you see ever play with their son?"

"They don't even know each other," Sam said.

"Maybe they have a mutual friend. Maybe they play over't the Freeman's Park together."

"No, that's impossible. The Dredland boy isn't even in Denny's preschool. And Denny never goes to the park without one of us. There can't be a connection. Can't be?"

"Look, folks, I've got two kids missing from the same side of Hempstead and that connects them. Maybe we don't know what the common ground is, but if there is a connection, maybe we can find both of them without anyone fuss, see?"

"Chief, they're complete strangers. Coincidence, that's all it is. Coincidence," said Sam.

Berman raked his scalp.

"There's no connection," Sam repeated. "Why are you waiting? If you have the dogs let them go, while the trail is still fresh!"

"Because I gotta be sure," Berman said. "I got three hundred volunteers beating the bushes round the clock, looking for a boy that's been missing for two days. I got fifteen full-time cops that haven't been off since Tuesday, and nine other law enforcement agencies involved going through every ditch and culvert in the county. And I even got the press trying to take pictures of my hemorrhoids now before I pull everything apart and start looking for your boy. I have to know if we're looking for two boys together, or two boys alone. I gotta be sure he isn't in some treelouse eating Oreo cookies because you spanked his bottom last night."

A fat vein flared beneath Berman's jaw. He looked down abruptly and recovered and pinched his cigarette in two.

"Look, our son is—missing!" Lydia stammered. "I pray to God

that he went out in the night alone, and not with some deranged person if he did go out alone and if we hurry, maybe we'll find him before he gets hurt."

Berman took a drag from the stub of his lucky.

Maybe, he thought, maybe they would find the boy. And maybe they wouldn't. Maybe he'd divide up. What was left of a pretty good search effort, an effort that was bound to run out of gas in a day or so, and they wouldn't find diddy-squat. Six months from now, after a proper period of standing by the chief, Don Rawlings, the City Manager would ask him to write a note saying he resigns. It'd be just like of Don. Hell, probably say, "Sorry, Otis, but you gotta keep things in perspective."

Maybe all of that will happen, Berman thought, but none of it will matter, because, come good or bad, he'd still be able to cross paths with Lydia Follet, and be able to look her in the eye. Damn, if he wouldn't.

"All right then," he said. Lydia and Sam clutched one another.

"Hey, Walt?"

Walt Dillman, another uniform, another face carrying the baggage of sleepless nights, hurried to the light beside the chief.

"Yeah?"

"Gwan in the house and call Law Castle at county. Tell him what's gone on, and for God's sake, tell him to keep it off the radio for a few hours and tell him to c'mon down here."

"Right."

"And Walt? Tell him to see if he can get that TV chopper in the air without answering any hard questions, you follow?"

"Sure do."

Walt hurried into the house.

"Henry?" Berman called across the lawn. "Hey, Henry, wake up those hounds of yours."

Beside the van on the lawn, Henry Fleischman, a stout shadow of red flannel, spit something on the grass, then yanked open the doors to the van. Dog claws scratched against the metal floor of the van. The pack tumbled out on Henry's fan of grasses.

"Let 'em have it!" Berman said. Sam and Lydia edged onto the grass.

Henry took the Cookie Monster bedsheet and began weaving it in front of the dogs' faces. The pack nipped and danced after it. He led them, all tangled and stumbling over one another, across the lawn where he repeated the ritual. Then he pulled the mob over to the corner of the lot where he muttered commands, edging them back and forth along the lot line.

"Please, God, please," Lydia whispered, clinging to the hard ridge of muck on her husband's arm.

"You, you smelly muck," Otis Berman said.

A Bronx A Spanish as clear and cold as a January midnight, broke the confusion of the night. Another, then another, followed. The pack pulled with a force that almost cost Henry his footing.

"We got something?" Henry cried.

Lydia took sudden halting steps toward the pack. Sam caught her by the hand.

"Mr. Follet, Mrs. Follet," the chief said over the howl of the hounds. "You come with me in my car."

Sam and Lydia followed. Otis Berman into a sudden storm of car ignitions and slamming doors. Tires squeaked on asphalt; the van lurched off the lawn.

The pack was already half-way to the end of Shady Maple Lane, pulling Henry Fleischman and a half dozen police cars toward the dawn, baying glory over a hot trail.

Denny plucked his way through strands of rusted barbed wire and walked down a short forgotten farm lane. He climbed its rolling flank and skidded down the other side, clawing free soft fisthills of corrupt bark. With the deadfall behind him, he entered a stand of ancient oaks. The ground was soft and black under tufts of grass the footing uneven. Galle had grazed her once, planting their hooves in the saturated soil, and sucking them back out again, leaving behind little crackers that never evened out. Denny hopped from one to another as though they were stones in a slow moving stream.

Far away, on the Chicago and Northwestern line, a train clattered through, blasting long and short bursts on its horn, claiming right of way. Further away, a helicopter thrashed the morning air. Dogs barked. The youth saw the rim of the sun bubble over the horizon; it was the color of his mother's stove top when she boiled water for oatmeal.

In close now, he thought. He tromped over spongy earth. His velvet strapped tennies were soaked and they sang a squishy song back and forth. He noticed cars for the first time crossing the horizon. The interstate scraped out a path through low hill beyond the trees and the little cars were nothing more than stoking gallery shapes. Denny made a blaster with his hand.

"Keeeee! Blam! Blam! Blam!" Naughtly strangers in naughtly cars died nastily deaths.

Real close. Something strong, like his father's grip when he raised him to touch the ceiling, pushed him on. It pushed inside and made him hurry.

The sun hurried, too. It took its place in a morning sky, not quite awake with color. Beneath it, on the highway, Denny saw cars stop. The motor that made the shooting gallery move stopped. A line of cars perched against the sky. Windshields and steel metal reflected red morning sun.

Denny's hand melted back into a little-boy hand. It was not far now. Not far at all.

The face was different. Denny knew it was different from the face he had seen on television, but that part of it he had not seen as clearly as he had seen the soft black earth and broken-down farm buildings and a cement ring sunk low in the meadow—the ring just a few steps away now.

Why is the face at/ferend? Mind tried to suck the shoes from his

feet. Dogs yowled and barked on the verge of triumph. Helicopter noise was thunder. A storm shook the tops of the old oaks, snapping under-dry branches. Loud voices called out Denny's name; voices that were scratchy and full of metal, but he didn't hear them any more than he heard the lady on the newswreck. Because he was close. He was close to the low cement ring, the cracked wall.

There were no boards across the well. On television, Denny once saw some children playing on boards that covered an old well. The children jumped on the boards and fell through. Firemen went down into the well to save the children. But this was not really a well.

Denny didn't know anything about this cement ring. He didn't know that it had been sunk into the tender damp earth so that seep-water would brim up for the cattle that used this meadow. The tumbled walls of a barn and homestead at the edge of the tree stand meant nothing to Denny.

Only the face. The face meant something. He wanted to know why the face wasn't the same.

"Denny," his father called out.

"Denny, stop," his mother shrieked.

The helicopter thudded away, and returned to hover over Denny and the waiting cistern.

Denny climbed over one more rolling tree trunk and edged up to the lip of the cistern. His hands touched the coarse weatherbeaten cement. He could feel the savage cracks in the wall, and the moss that had flourished in the shadows. Algae carpeted the pool.

His parents and the police swept across the meadow toward him. Their arms pinwheeling in warning, they shouted.

Denny didn't look up to see his parents' tear-stained faces, or the helicopter filling the sky above, but he could feel their emotion and the wind from the machine. He knew that in a moment they would have him, embracing, crying, pressing him into their shoulder. In a moment.

At the edge of the cistern, Denny took his look.

The face poked up out of the water just like the round field of stones that made a bed for the body. It was bloated and green and alive with feeding scavengers. The gap-toothed smile was nothing more than a water-filled hole. The cheeks were as white as paste and fat with decay. If the eyes were open under a layer of algae, Denny couldn't tell. But now he knew why the face was different. Death was different. Real death was different. This was real death.

His grandfather, at the only funeral Denny had ever attended, had filled a coffin as if he were napping, looking no different than he had when he had endured his tickling, loving the torture. But the boy in the picture, the boy in the cistern was dead for real. It was as different as a rat lurid in rice.

His mother and father had buried him in their arms. It was a moment before they saw what he had seen from the start, and when they did, they pulled him hard from the rim of the cistern. He tried to look back, but they held him close. There were policemen crowding around now, blotting the view with their blue-black shirts.



RUNNING SCARED

Celeste Paul

"Denny, oh God!" his mother cried. They hugged him until he couldn't breathe and smeared his face with their tears. Then they tried to scold him, about leaving, about doing a thing like that. Then they hugged him some more.

In a little while, they took him up to the police cars and hugged him some more. He pushed past all the love so that he could see the shotgun and the radio and all the other fascinations that the car had to offer a boy.

"Can I hear the siren?" he asked when the policeman with the tired look on his face leaned into the car. Asking made his mother laugh and start crying all over.

The policeman didn't smile or even answer about the siren. He only howled at Denny, who started back.

How'd you find him, son?" Otis Berman asked, his voice sounding to Denny like rocks rubbed together.

"He couldn't have known. It's—it's not possible," Sam Follet said.

"Son?"

Sam and Lydia, as if by secret agreement, pulled Denny deeper into their embrace. Otis Berman, worn to the bone, weary with the hard burden of a death that had flipped from probability to reality, looked deeply into Denny's eyes, which seemed to sparkle as if they found hidden treasure, a treasure that could not be shared. Suddenly, the chief of police didn't know what he was seeing, or what he had seen this night.

"Take him home," Berman said. "Take him home and hide him. I'll keep the press off as long as I can. Just take him home, now."

In the arms of his parents, Denny got his first ride in a police car. The siren song made him smile. And he smiled because of what he found.

He smiled.

He knew he could find anything.

6

Dawn was beginning to brighten the sky and, except for the mellow chorus of birds, most of the world still slept in the pale paelets of early morning. Later, the sunlight would give way to the noise and bustle of the day. But for now, it was peaceful, cool and quiet.

In the saltmarshes, dawn came unnoticed. The little light that penetrated the thick marsh grass was swallowed up by the mist that hung like a grey curtain over the wetlands and the surrounding water. A gull stood poised at the edge of a tidal pool, shifting her weight delicately from one leg to the other. The carcass that lay half in and half out of the pool still held the promise of a meal. She worried her sharp beak along a curve of rib and tore away morsels of dried decaying flesh. The dog was a large one it had been dead for several days.

Hunger made the gull careless. Like a lightrope walker, she picked her way along the spinal column, pecking here and there at the maggots and flies hidden among the vertebrae. The stench from the corpse rose around her, blocking out all other scents.

The gull hopped atop the dog's skull where it lay atop a bed of marsh grass, and pecked greedily at what was left of the muzzle. As she raised her head, the wind shifted and she became alert to a new and unfamiliar scent.

Sensing the danger, she threw herself back toward the water and life. Her wings fluttered frantically in a desperate attempt to gain altitude. Her shrill cry of alarm was cut off sharply as a grey hand plucked her out of the air. The morning stillness descended again, unbroken by the single grey feather that drifted on the wind and was soon lost to the larger greyness of the mist.

Keith Edwards pulled the bow tight on his addidas and then began his warm-up routine of push-ups, sit-ups, and stretching exercises. Muscles rippled cleanly under his taut T-shirt. He grunted with satisfaction as he felt them warming with the exertion. Twenty minutes later, he closed the front door behind him, and tucked the key into the pocket of his shorts.

Duchess, his Irish setter, barked plaintively from the back yard, begging to come along, but he ignored her pleas. He was in no mood for her shenanigans and he very much wanted to be alone. Taking a deep breath of the early morning air, he began to run. Summer was giving way to Fall and in another month, there'd be frost on the grass. For these few weeks, the seasons would live in gentle harmony and the weather would be perfect: not too hot and not too cool. It was his favorite time of year.

He ran slowly at first, allowing his muscles to warm up and

giving his heartbeat and breathing a chance to build gradually. It was going to be a good run. He could feel it in the smooth flow of his body, one step blending into the next. It would be a good day to try a new route.

He had seen the turnout on Thursday while driving home from work, and had taken it more out of curiosity than anything else. It had proved to be a six mile stretch of level road jutting straight out into the salt marshes. For the last few miles, the land was just a narrow finger, with marsh and ocean on either side. The road ended abruptly in a circular turn-around at the gates of a large mansion. There were no other houses and no other traffic to worry about. It was a perfect place to run.

Keith loved running. He had taken up two years ago when he noticed his middle beginning to spread. He had taken to the sport immediately, and was soon winning all of the local races. But he ran primarily for the simple joy of it. He felt alive when he was running, more vitally alive than he felt at any other time.

He had reached the turnout Misty Point Road—the sign was old and rusted, and hung slightly askew on its wooden post. He rounded the corner, checking his watch and making a mental note of the time. His time would be good today, with a little luck, he might even break his record. He increased the pace. Soon the noise of the early morning traffic passed, and the only sound that remained were the sounds of his pounding feet on the asphalt and the occasional cry of a gull.

He began to sweat lightly and was grateful for the steady breeze that was coming off the water. Marsh grass rose on both sides of the road. The tall brown stalks stood closely together, forming a seemingly impenetrable wall, their fuzzy heads bending gently with the wind. Periodically, they thinned and he could see the marshlands beyond, dotted with small inlets and tidal pools.

It was at one of these breaks that he first noticed the fog. It began as a mist that curled in gentle swirls and eddies among the grass stems or hovered, here and there, in the mouth of a tiny bay. As Keith ran further, he saw it begin to condense and thicken, sending out grey probing fingers onto the road. It was easy to see how Misty Point had gotten its name.

The fog closed in around him with a startling quickness, an anonymous and opaque shade of grey. Like the victim of a coronary, all life around him seemed drained of their life force. It was depressing, and a bit frightening.

He considered turning back. Visibility was near zero and he knew that any motorist would be unable to spot him until it was too late. The road was not well traveled, however. Not a single car had passed him since the turnout. He would be able to hear an approaching vehicle in plenty of time to get out of the way. He decided to finish his run as planned, and keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the few feet of road visible ahead of him, determinedly kept his pace.

The silence was eerie. The fog seemed to have a dampening effect on sound, as well as sight. The hisping of the waves ceased, as did the raucous calls of the seagulls. Only the noise of his own footfalls broke

the quiet. He felt utterly alone, marooned on a world devoid of color and sound. Though he perspired freely now, the sense of isolation made him shiver.

He ran through the chill grey mist, and after several hundred yards he realized he was no longer alone. Behind him somewhere in the mist, a sea of footsteps echoed his own. He felt immediate relief and a sense of kinship there was another poor sap trying to run out in this soup.

"Hello," he called out.

The fog swallowed the word and there was no answer from the other runner, just persistent pursuing footsteps. The more he listened to them, the more they seemed to be, not an echo of or an attempt to match his pace, but rather a mockery of it. The steps matched his own steady rhythm, but in a way that left no doubt that the rhythm was foreign to the other runner's normal gait.

Keith ran on. He did not call out again and the other runner made no attempt to break the surrounding silence. Keith found himself wishing a car would come by or that there would be a break in the fog so he could see his pursuer. The footsteps approached him then kept to a set distance, just far enough in the cloak of mist to conceal the runner's identity.

Sweat trickled into Keith's eyes, and he realized that he had unconsciously increased his speed. At this rate he would soon become winded, and despite his growing uneasiness, he made the effort to slow down. The footsteps slowed also, keeping pace in taunting similarity. They continued for another mile, and then the other runner made his move.

The pace of the mysterious runner's footsteps increased rapidly. As the steps came closer, Keith noticed a disturbing difference between them and his own. They made not the muffled slap of running shoes on asphalt, but a familiar clicking sound.

With sickening clarity, the realization struck. He threw a glance over his shoulder, but the fog revealed nothing. If only he could get to the big house at the end of the road and get inside the gates. He ran full out now, heedless of breathing or pace. His calf muscles cramped in protest, but he ran on, fear making him oblivious to the pain. It was a frantic, desperate run—the age old flight of the prey when it feels the predator at its heels. The pace behind him changed also, becoming uneven and loping and the other runner reverted to its normal gait.

Keith looked over his shoulder again and for a moment, he made out a large shape in the mist. His heart was pounding in his chest and his breath came in great ragged gasps. Suddenly the great iron gates loomed in front of him. He pushed at them frantically, but they were locked. There was no place left to run.

He turned to face his pursuer, to see, finally what it was. Keith was accustomed to running with his dog. His ears knew the steady click of claws on concrete. He had recognized the sound, except that the steps were much too heavy, the claws much too long, and their owner had only two legs.

It came out of the fog, loping easily, barely winded. It was the same gray as the mist; its body covered with a short growth of fur. For a moment, its yellow eyes met his as its lips pulled back over a set of ivory fangs. Keith had seen that grin at many races, had even worn it himself—the smile of the victor. Then it laughed. Its laugh was triumphant, almost human.

At an upper window of the great house, a hand drew back the lace curtain, and eyes calmly followed the scene at the gate to its conclusion. The hand let the curtain fall back into place and then reached for the ancient bell pull that hung nearby. A butler answered its summons swiftly and silently.

"Robert, you may bring me my tea now."

"Yes, sir."

"And Robert, don't bother to feed him today. He's already eaten."

"Very good, sir."

"Yes, I'm sure it was"

[6]

MAL RATS JL. Corneau

Trembling with apprehension and excitement, Lisa Campbell dropped stealthily from her first floor bedroom into honeysuckle drenched midnight air. Her tanned and sandaled feet touched fragrant clipped grass. She sprang, racing past stumbling tract houses to the prearranged meeting place.

Right on time, steel thunder approached. Illumination from the street lamps and porch lights spangled the Cherry's glossy hide as it crawled slowly through the tidy suburban streets, headlights darkened. The polished crimson beast leaned into the curb and halted. The passenger door swung open.

Lisa darted from beneath the spindly arms of a willow and scrambled into the back seat of the car.

The door clunked shut. Growing softly, the machine rumbled away into the night. Turning sharply onto Duke Street, its wide rear tires spun in a rubber shriek that racketed above the heads of peed dreamers abed in Tripps Run Valley Estates. Lisa's mother, for once, lightly surfaced from sleep beneath a designer sheet, turned over with a sigh and eased back into slumber.

Out on Duke Street, Lisa popped open a Bud and took a sip as she was whisked into open countryside at eighty miles per hour. She repressed a grimace and wondered if she'd ever get used to the taste of beer.

Sherry Phillips, Lisa's newest best friend, twisted around in the front passenger seat and grinned at Lisa with tiny, uneven teeth. Her round face was dwarfed by a gigantic tangle of overexposed and bleached-tortured hair. Pretty eyes and soft lips beneath thick slatherings of frosty violet cosmetics.

She wriggled and fluttered long, muscane-cloaked lashes dramatically. "Ooh, Lisa, I'm really so glad you could, like, sneak out tonight and everything, you know? She leaned forward and whispered, "I'm supposed to be babysitting for the Hughes's, right, but those two never get home before three, so when they go out, when they get so ripped they can hardly crawl through the front door, when they get home, you know?" The tip of Sherry's Marlene glowed as she pushed in the grill of smoke. "I, uh, the Hughes's two little monsters pulled out the phone off the hook and left the front door unlocked so I can get back in. All I have to do is be back around two." Sherry smirked. "Works every time."

Lisa's exhaled sense of adventure dropped a notch, diluted by a splash of guilt.

The Camaro roared, dropped back a gear and clutched curved pavement with grooved rubber claws.

A tall, thin young man with sharp features and a practiced toughboy scowl maneuvered the red beast with his knees under the steering wheel while his long, grease-encrusted fingers struggled with a stubborn Budweiser ring. He looked longingly out over the shimmering hood of his car and felt a tug of warm pride. The Camaro was one of the few sources of joy in his life and he loved her. She expressed for him everything he could not emotionally or physically manage himself: power, virility, courage, recklessness. He always felt diminished on his own and, like his daddy, consumed vast amounts of beer to further back up his flagging self confidence.

The bud ring finally yielded and he gulped a chilly draught while admiring Sherry's rounded buttocks as she knelt facing the back seat. He reached out and grabbed little pig's feet.

Sherry curled a glistening little lip and struck a stinging slap to his wrist. "Curtis?" she hissed. "You pig! Can't you wait?"

Curtis, happily buzzed and playful, slammed the Camaro's transmission into second, snarling chucking his lady fair onto her hirsutious hindparts.

"Ashhole," she snarled, adjusting her tight shorts and turning to resume conversation with Lisa.

Crouched next to Lisa in the cramped back seat, Jeff Holloway sucked mightily on his third brew of the evening. Normally, Jeff wouldn't have dreamed of hanging out with such a crew of losers, but Lisa's promise of free beer had sounded too good to pass up. Come Monday morning, Lisa and Sherry would fade back into the junior class at Tripps Run High and he would resume his rightful place among the "hip crowd." He was an ace, why not admit it? And Curtis, what a lowlife. Jeff wondered what high school dropouts did all day. Christ, he'd never admit to being anywhere near these turkeys.

He glanced over, half hearing Lisa passionately denouncing someone named Kally Summerfield and wondered what Lisa would look like without that glop smeared on her face. She looked like a whore. A real easy piece 'em, a few good moves on his part and Lisa'd roll right over for him. Jeff smiled, anticipating getting her alone in the dark.

Drawing the beer can Lisa felt herself relax a bit. Her fear of the red car's power faded. She couldn't really be killed in a crash, could she? Curtis sure had been drinking a lot. She thought briefly of her parents and what they might do if her little outing were discovered but nothing bad could happen because she was with Jeff, glorious, handsome Jeff, the object of her unending passion. And here he was, sitting right next to her. It was like a dream.

Lisa's face flamed when she glanced over and caught him smiling at her. With that immediate expression of desire, Jeff smiled timidly back, touching her carefully and acquiesced. She played Jeff liked brown hair and silently cursed her mother for steadfastly

refusing to let her use bleach.

Curtis vetoed the car to the gravel shoulder and braked to a sliding halt, pitching everyone forward.

Jeffs beer foamed down the front his new Calvin Klein shirt. "Christ, you're a menace, Simpson! If you can't drive, hang it up, okay?"

"You sure got a big mouth for a bicycle pilot, Holloway," Curtis replied in his best Dirty Harry whisper.

"Will you guys please shut up?" Sherry whined. "Yeah," Jeff said, sneering. "Let's see this stupid house you said you found and get out of here. Somebody might think I really belong with you jerks."

Lisa cringed. Did he mean her, too? Tears threatened to spill but she forced them back—her intricate eye makeup was at stake. She didn't want to look ugly.

They clambered out of the car and stood next to the twisting lane road that would through thick woodlands.

Are you positive this is the right place, Curtis? Lisa asked, intimidated by black silhouettes of dead trees standing silent guard at the edge of the woods. A thin silver of pale moon hovered in the ink-washed sky.

"Yeah, Curtis," Sherry added. "It's like radically dark out here, you know?"

Curtis rapped his beer can against a stone mile marker, making the others jump, startled. Curtis liked that.

"This is the place, kiddies. You ain't getting the wilies or nothin' are ya?" Curtis turned his pale, angular face to the heavens and howled like a wolf.

"Lose the bullshit!" Jeff grumbled, struggling to mask his own uneasiness. It's goddam dark all right, he thought. Jesus.

"Show the way, whitehead!"

Soon they stood looking up at an old, swaybacked wooden house that, during the day, probably looked more pathetic than frightening. But the night, had transformed the pitiful hulk of rotted planks into something black and monstrous. Darkness summoned horrific images to the gloom behind jagged windowpanes where hideous creatures might lurk in pooling shadows. The urge to flee and the desire to enter congealed and became one in the presence of such terrible beauty. The four explorers shivered with delicious terror.

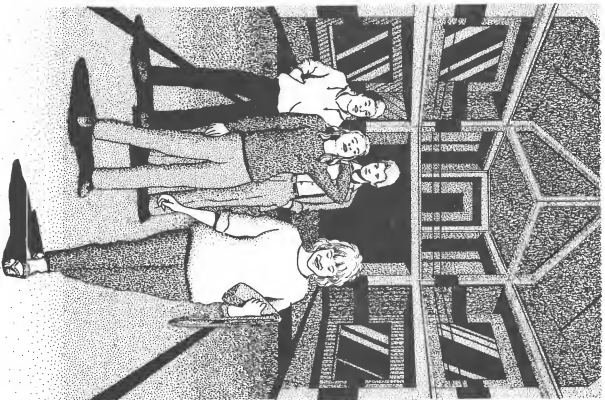
Sherry drew upon her somewhat limited vocabulary to express her personal delight. "Oh, Jesus!" she chirped, wiggling and prancing. "Let's go in, you guys?"

Go in? Fear poured over Lisa like a dousing of hot water, but it felt well, good in an odd sort of way. Like she was supercharged, really alive. When the others headed toward the house, she followed eagerly.

Curtis, in the lead, stopped and motioned behind him.

"Wait," he whispered.

He angled to the side of the house and peered into the tangled skein of trees. "Come over here," he called softly. "Quick."



LOST IN A/1961

The others caught up to Curtis and followed him through the woods until they reached an enormous clearing. They stood transfixed. Blinking at bright floodlights that washed over an immense modern building surrounded by a freshly paved parking lot.

Curtis goggled. "A shopping mall? He looked at the others incredulously. "What the hell's a shopping mall doing way out here?"

"Oh, who cares, dummy?" Sherry cried gleefully as she skipped out onto the lot. Shopping malls were her natural environment, and it made no difference where it was. In the middle of the lot, she stopped suddenly. "Oooh, gross," she exclaimed, turning up one foot to inspect the sole of a dainty pink pump. "It's all sticky, you guys!"

Curtis ventured across the pavement. "It's kind of spongy, bouncy—like, weird."

Jeff followed with Lisa right behind him. "Smells funny, too. Must've just been put down."

The lot was empty of cars and flowed unimpeded to the glass entrance doors to the mall. Lisa felt nervous about going in. Deep in her brain, a warning look shape and signaled persistently. "The doors'll be locked this late, won't they?"

Curtis grabbed a smooth wooden handle and swung the door open easily.

The interior of the mall spread out over an area roughly the size of a football field. Its dominant architectural scheme was strictly modern Art Deco, utilizing extensive fanciful chrome work and neon storefronts. Bold lounges of red and black were tastefully interspersed throughout the grand design. Two sleek escalators and a central scenic elevator connected two wide upper and lower concourses. From discreetly hidden speakers, canned music drowned in sterile clouds, specifically manufactured to grease shoppers' wallets.

But there were no shoppers. Only Lisa, Sherry, Curtis and Jeff.

The odor of the parking lot was even more pronounced within the building. The smell banged a nail in Lisa's memory, but she couldn't recall where she'd recognized it from or what it was. And the alien emptiness of the mall struck her as ghastly.

"I think it's closed for the night," she said weakly. "Don't you think we should leave before we're arrested for trespassing or something?"

"Bulshit, man," Curtis responded. "The joints lit up and ready for business. The stores are wide open, sweetheart."

"What's your problem, Lisa?" Sherry chided. "Are you, like, paranoid or what?"

Lisa felt so chastised and foolish that she didn't offer any resistance when Sherry grabbed her arm and led her toward a trendy looking little clothing boutique.

Curtis and Jeff decided to investigate the scenic elevator and ambled off together in that direction.

"I wonder what they used for this flooring?" Jeff wondered aloud, testing the floor with little bounces as he stalked. It's the same rubbery kind of material they used in the parking lot, only

this stuff looks like indolene.

"Some kind of space age crap, I guess," Curtis replied, feeling the need to make some response. He always felt stupid around damn kindergarten sports jocks like Jeff Holloway. He wished he'd brought a beer with him. "Whatever it is," he concluded lamely, "it stinks like hell!"

They arrived at the elevator and Jeff punched the control button. The paneled glass car began a slow descent from the upper floor. "Shit," Jeff said impatiently, jiggling the down button furiously. "I bet you could make it between floors faster standing on the damn escalator."

"No way," Curtis said. "You gotta cover lots more distance on the escalator, man."

"Well, excuse me Dr. Einstein, but I didn't know they taught physics down at Juvenile Hall."

Curtis angrily snatched a bill from the battered black wallet chained to his grubby denims and waved it under Jeff's nose. "This little green piece of paper says the elevator's faster, how'die?"

It was Jeff likewise produced a ten and they shook hands. It was agreed that Jeff would mount the bottom stair of the escalator the moment the elevator began to rise. First man to plant a foot on the second floor would win.

Jeff took position at the base of the escalator and waited for Curtis to start the race.

Curtis entered the elevator, pressed the button, and the door sighed shut. The octagonal glass car trembled and started to rise. Through panes, Curtis saw Jeff hop on the electric stairs and begin sliding upwards. He laughed. Jeff would never beat him. He had that know-it-all jock. Oh, yeah.

Curtis's attention snapped abruptly back to the inside of the elevator. His laughter choked off.

The strange resilient texture of the elevator floor had become antsy, and the weird smell was getting stronger.

Something was wrong with the floor. Whether he was beginning to sink into it or if it was rising up over the toes of his boots, he couldn't tell. A tight knot of dread cramped his belly. He could see the floor bubbling, but his mind wouldn't accept that it was actually dissolving, boiling up past his ankles. His feet felt hot and he jerked up his right foot to take a look. Tatters of feather dripped from his naked foot. A fireball of pain erupted, and his legs and feet were burning and Curtis was squealing. "Oh, God! Please help me, oh Jesus, I'm on fire!"

The car rapidly filled with stinking fluid and Curtis slumped, flesh eaten away from his legs, bones beginning to lose rigidity. Curtis's central nervous system, overwhelmed by pain, shut down entirely and sent out blessed shock to separate the boy from his agony.

Then Curtis simply stopped living.

Rising slowly on the escalator, Jeff began to regret having made the bet. His ten bucks were as good as down the toilet. The elevator

had already moved itself upstairs. So where was Curtis? Jeff scanned the top floor. He expected the dumb redneck to be leaning over the railing, bragging and braying like the jackass he was. To win, though, Curtis had to make physical contact with the second floor. Jeff squinted for better focus and saw that the elevator appeared to be filled with pink, frothy liquid. Something solid was bobbing around inside, bumping gently against one glass panel, then another. *What the hell?*

It was during that moment of speculation that the moving stairs relaxed into muck and Jeff started to sink. He grabbed the plastic side rails but his hands stopped through up to the elbows and he was caught. He managed to drag one leg out of the churning mess to discover his Levis and Nikes were eaten away. Jeff would have screamed had he not, at that instant, been dragged under by the boiling maelstrom that had once been a sane, solid object with a name and function. Jeff's last thought as his flesh separated from his skeleton was *this can't happen to me*.

While Curtis and Jeff were hustled into eternity, Lisa and Sherry idly thumbed through rack after rack of cheap sequined sweaters and flimsy stretch pants.

Lisa glanced around nervously. "Sherry, don't you think it's strange that there aren't any salespeople around anywhere?"

"Oh, you always think about everything too much. Why don't you try to enjoy yourself a little instead of worrying all the time, huh?" Sherry continued dipping through sweaters. "Hey, look at this color!"

The acrid odor that pervaded the mall was starting to get to Lisa. It seemed to have permeated everywhere. Everything, including cheesy merchandise that so interested Sherry, reeked of it. Lisa was tired of looking through the racks. And though she hated to admit it, she was rapidly tiring of Sherry's company. Lisa was scared, getting a tremendous headache and longed for the security of her own bedroom. Her spirit of adventure was fizzling for the evening had gone flat.

As she ruminated about her miserable luck, the bottom of Lisa's feet and the tips of her fingers suddenly began to tingle—the tingling quickly became uncomfortable. She rubbed her fingers together as if to wipe off an invisible irritant. Sherry was also busily shaking her own hands, wide-eyed with alarm.

"Jesus!" Sherry screamed, waving her hands violently as the burning sensation became more acute.

"What's going on?" Tears brimmed and spilled in mascara-smudged cascades down her round cheeks. Angry blisters formed on the tips of her fingers. "Oh, God! Why is this happening to me?"

Propelled by a wave of panic, Sherry lurched out of the store onto the concourse upon feet that felt as if they'd been fried on a crackling hot griddle. Screaming and babbling, she ran in a peculiar hippy-hop, favoring one searing foot. Then the other until she reached an exit door. Throwing herself against the glass, she cried out in relief. She was going to be allowed to make it. She was going to

escape.
But wait a minute, something's wrong. Someone's locked the damn door! Sherry was trapped in her worst nightmare. She cursed and pummeled at the door with all her fear and fury.

Then the door went soft.
It began to melt, getting gummy, snaring her tiny fists as she struck out, sticking them in. All at once her feet were mired and imprisoned. Sherry writhed and bucked, only sinking deeper into the churning ooze.

Quite suddenly, the poor girl just gave up—simply quit fighting and let herself go. She swung in hideous lazy arcs, suspended by her imbedded forearms. With a forthrightness of will she never realized she possessed, Sherry retreated into unconsciousness and made the hurting go away.

Lisa was dimly aware that her fingertips and the sensitive skin beneath the arches of her feet, was numbing. She stood anchored, mesmerized by the unreal quality of Sherry's terrible struggle and surrender. A desperate image of Sherry, equipped with fragile moth wings, fluttering across the web of a giant, scuttling spider filled the unbidden across Lisa's mind. A scream lodged in her throat. Sherry's head fell back and her body was being methodically sucked into the building.

Something came loose inside Lisa's head and her feet took over, moving on their own volition. The floor turned to glue as she ran. Lisa giggled hysterically. None of this is real, her brain screamed. You're safely home in bed and this is a dream. Mother is going to wake you from this nightmare and tell you it's time for breakfast any second now.

Tendrils of slinking spider string from her feet like taffy, slowing Lisa's progress. It didn't really matter, though, since she had no particular destination in mind and it was all just an awful dream.
Her left foot stuck fast and Lisa plummited down, it seemed to take centuries to hit the floor. When she did, her arms and legs slipped down into a furiously churning morass. Lisa didn't try to escape. She only howled pitifully.

"You ready to wake up now? Please, wake me up!"
Her pleas became a meaningless jumble of disconnected grunts and guttural moans. Her mouth was still forming silent words as her face fell forward into the mush. Her jaws opened and closed mechanically, drawing deadly fluid into her mouth.

Within moments, Lisa stopped moving altogether.
The entire expanse of the mall convulsed and fanned, falling inward upon itself like heated waxwork. Doorways and walls joined to form viscous knots. The upper level of the building sagged and dropped in a semiquintid clot to the first floor to form one huge, seething mass.

Outside, the parking lot slithered up to the building and melted into the rolling main body. The facade lost definition and sank into an unidentifiable mass of churning, putty-like material.

Then, like a dying star, the mass began collapsing upon itself, becoming smaller and incredibly denser. Soon it was no larger than a marble, although it weighed literally thousands of tons. Driven down by sheer force of weight, the immensely heavy, but tiny mass burrowed into the ground, sinking through the earth's crust, coming to rest nearly half a mile down.

Beneath the surface of the planet, the shape-changing animal lay in a state resembling hibernation. There it would remain, silent and undetected, until hunger drove it up again.

It was not a particularly bright creature—roughly the intellectual equivalent of a reptile. But it was an extremely well adapted animal which had evolved many millennia before the appearance of humans. It possessed the peculiar ability to physically mimic the very shelters its prey sought. The creature's central nervous system was sensitive to mammal thought patterns. Its transformations were automatic.

Humans finally emerged and rapidly began to adapt their environment to suit their needs, subsequently tending to rely less and less upon instinct for survival. The intelligent hominids soon became fast and competent—easy prey. Super-intelligent in comparison to most animals, humans would walk into traps the common field mouse could detect a mile away.

Beneath the world, the shape changing creature slept.

Above, cure Simpsons blood red Canaro had attracted some late night renegades. Three young men stood around the car, admiring its lustrous skin and sleek body. Eventually, one of them noticed something dark in the woods and the trio soon stood in front of an old abandoned barn. The boys, a bright fifteen year old named Danny, recognized a sharp odor in the air—he recalled it from chemistry class. Although he knew what it was, he dutifully followed his companions into the house. Danny wasn't scared enough to risk being judged coward by his buddies, no sir.
The stench of hydrochloric acid, a common digestive juice found in the stomachs of many creatures—including humans—drifted on night breeze, mingling with sweet home-suckle.
The house-shedded creature loomed in deep shadows and allowed the boys entry. It had been waiting a long, long time and was voracious.

A Special Snow

Wesley Morrison

Nicholas Tesch felt good. He was eight, and it was nearly Christmas. And today, he was part of a family again. Beth had agreed to marry his father.

He walked between them as they came out of the Westmoreland Mall. While they had wandered from store to store, Nicholas decided that he liked her. She would be a good mother. He couldn't remember his first one, and he could barely wait the four months until he had his second.

"We have to wait that long too, Nicholas," Beth had told him.

"Yeah, but it's different for you two."

December air caressed their faces, and a snow was lightly falling. They left footprints in the thin whiteness already on the parking lot. Nicholas always loved winter, and he stood patiently as his father fumbled with the keys to open the Cadillac while Beth stood and shivered.

"Come on, Jim." Her teeth chattered loudly.

"There."

Winter sat in the car with them. It seemed colder inside than it had in the parking lot. Nicholas huddled in the back as the car's engine started. And died.

"Ah, shit," his father groaned, turning the key again.

"Jim," Beth said, chiding him.

"Jim, eight, alright?" Nicholas' voice was almost lost in his scarf.

"It's not like I've never heard someone say shit before."

"That still doesn't make it right."

The car died again.

"Ah, shit."

"Jim?"

"I think it's just the cold. What about you, Nicholas?"

"Try it again, Dad."

His father turned and smiled at him. Jim tried again, and Nicholas thought *start*. The engine turned over.

"You're a special kid, Nikky," he said.

They left the mall and moved onto the highway. Nicholas smiled. He was special. Beth knew that, but she didn't know that he was special. He had a way with things.

The snow came down heavier as they drove on. It gradually got harder to see. Jim turned on the radio.

"...a major storm watch is in effect with twelve to fourteen inches expected by morning. It's lousy out, so stay in and rock with..."

It didn't track south, Jim." Beth said.

"I know."

"Can we make it over Ligonier Mountain?"

"I don't know. It's a long way to Johnstown."

The storm grew more intense. Nicholas sat and felt something like fear slowly rising up inside of him. His specialness grew with fear, but he was always worried that he would be too slow, or do something wrong.

The Cadillac hit a patch of ice. Nicholas felt the car lurch to the side, heading for the trees.

So, he thought.

The car straightened, returning to the road.

"Thank you," his father whispered. Nicholas knew he meant him, but Beth wouldn't know. Nicholas smiled. He liked having some secrets from his new mother.

"How does it look?" she asked a few minutes later. The headlights showed only the falling snow. Thick as milk.

Slow and easy and well make it. Right, Nicholas?"

Right."

They were coming to a bridge, a car in the other lane, when they hit the next icy spot. Beth let out a cry. Nicholas couldn't see the bridge as the Cadillac spun like a top. Then his mind caught the car, righted it, and they crossed.

His father let out his breath slowly and loudly. Beth's head lay in her hands. Nicholas felt their relief, but he couldn't feel any of his own. The cold in the back seat had grown worse, and his own fear had kept pace with it.

He twisted around, looking for the cause. His eyes caught a gleam out the window, off in the snow behind them. It came closer, and slowly split into two headlights.

"We won't make it over the mountain," Beth announced.

"We could go around."

"No, we'd better stop at a motel."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

The headlights brightened behind them. The cold deepened. Nicholas stared right at the twin beams, feeling the chill coming from the driver behind him.

"That the help?" Jim mumbled. "Just what we need, a tailgater."

"Jim, what are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"You're going faster, Jim."

"I know."

"The roads are bad, Jim," she pleaded.

"I know. Look, if I don't, then Mr. Closeness out there is gonna be in the back seat with Nicholas."

Nicholas tore his eyes away and sank down in the seat. He stared at Beth's hair, forcing his eyes not to move from the brown curls that her hat didn't cover. The lights kept pace with them. He could tell that without looking, just as he could tell that there was something special about the driver.

Full over, Jim. Beth glanced over her shoulder. Nicholas saw the fear in her eyes and something else. He couldn't name it, like it was being hidden from him, but it was there. "Let him go around."

Alright. Hear that, Nicholas?"

"Yeah?"

"Let's do it, then."

His father pressed down on the accelerator. The tires spun on the ice, but Nicholas made them grip the road. The Cadillac pulled away, left the lights behind, barely made a turn, and then pulled off into the parking lot of a small restaurant. It was closed, but the floodlights on the building covered even the side of the road.

"Come on," Jim mumbled, his fingers tapping the wheel. "Come on."

The snow falling between the trees glistened. Headlights rounded the curve, and Nicholas saw a pickup, red beneath the patches of clinging snow. He could feel the driver in it.

This was the one.

The cold deepened inside of Nicholas, wrapping around his heart. His fear grew, and his eyes fixed on what he could see of the driver, a dark outline in the shadows of the floodlights.

"Drive, Jim! Drive!" Beth shouted.

The Cadillac lurched forward, partly from the push Nicholas gave it. He held it on the road until he felt his father had it under control. Nicholas looked back, seeing little through the storm. No headlights, no pickup, just the cold, following.

"We'd better stop," Beth said as they reach Ligonier. The light was green, so they pulled off the highway and passed the restored fort, heading for the center of town.

Nicholas barely noticed the change in scenery. What he did notice was the change in the cold. It felt like a bird taking wing. "Don't stop, Dad," he said.

"What?"

"Don't stop! There's something special about the driver!"

"Oh, God!"

They passed through Ligonier, heading toward the mountain and Johnstown. Nicholas didn't turn to look back. He could feel the driver, and he could see the growing lines of worry in his father's face reflected in the rear-view.

"Jim," Beth said slowly, "what are you doing? We're headed for the mountain."

"Yeah."

She seemed to snap then. Her voice nearly echoed inside the car.

"Why?"

"If Nicholas says we don't stop, then we don't stop!"

She twisted in the front seat, and the lights caught her face. Beth stared at Nicholas, her mouth hanging open, as if she were deciding whether or not to speak. He felt it again with her, something hidden. Finally, she turned and faced front again. Nicholas felt a relief he thought he shouldn't.

The terrain gradually rose, and the snow kept dropping, hiding the woods around them and the road ahead. It didn't hide the lights. They showed in their pursuit, once again keeping their distance.

"Don't slow down, Dad."

"I have to."

"Dad."

"It's a goddamn hill, Nicholas! I can't make it go any faster!"

The chill crept closer, but by bit, like a stalking hunter. If could laugh. Nicholas thought he was hearing it.

The Cadillac slowed as the grade steepened. Nicholas heard the wheels spinning as they fought to claw their way forward. Then he felt the chill expand, just as the headlights did, filling the car with their glare, binding them like the sun shining off ice.

"More, damn you!" His father's fist struck the top of the dashboard.

Nicholas could hear the pickup's engine now, a steady roar caught by the wind. It seemed to wall around the car, and inside his mind, growing ever deeper as the lights brightened.

More! he thought, panicking.

The Cadillac lurched, twisted sideways, and filled the road. His father's hands fought the wheel, and Nicholas fought the car. Beth managed to straighten it. Then Nicholas felt himself pushed back, the coldness of the touch froze his mind for a moment, and the thaw was more painful than he could ever imagined. He tried to scream, but he had no voice.

Unable to stop himself, Nicholas looked back, and his eyes were caught by the cold beams that cut through the blizzard. They were no longer normal, no longer headlights. They were too bright, and the walling had become a scream, then a steady hum that shook his teeth and set his skull vibrating.

"Nikky," his father said softly, "do it."

"What are you talking about, Jim?" Beth's voice quivered.

Nicholas watched the pickup—or what resembled one—coming at them. He knew they would not make it over the mountain. They wouldn't even get much closer to the top. "Not again, Dad!"

"Nicholas."

"I hate it, Dad."

"Do it, Nicholas!"

The pickup's horn blasted, jarring the hum in his mind. He could see the outline of the driver once again, brighter than the headlights. Now it wasn't quite human.

Kill he thought.

The lights veered off, sliding across the road. Their red tail-lights took their place as the truck twisted on the ice. Then Nicholas saw it smashing into the trees beside the road. He heard metal bend and tear. The hum died, but an explosion replaced it. Through a curtain of snow, the fireball rose.

Beth's mouth hung open now, but she stared at Jim. Nicholas felt the headache coming, just like it always did. Stretching out on the back seat, he closed his eyes, feeling the pain.

"Nicholas?" He ignored his father. "Nicholas?"

"Leave me alone!"

"Jim," Beth sounded calm. Nicholas tried to use that to fight off the pain. That the hell just happened?

"Nothing." His voice was as slow as the car.

Nicholas sat up. The cold had not left him, but it had now changed. He knew it should come from the wreck, but could feel nothing in that direction. Instead, it seemed to have spread all around them. It made no sense. It should be coming from *somewhere*.

"Jim."

"Damn, it tell me what happened!" Her voice gave out each word like its own sentence, separate, cold as the feeling that Nicholas still

had. *The snow?*

"Dead!"

"Shut up!"

"That the snow it's in the snow!"
The two in front looked back at him. His father's eyes widened, but Beth calmly gazed at him. Nicholas was held by her eyes, and the veil dropped away from her. Out on the empty road, Nicholas slowly understood.

Beth was *special*.

The wind gusted, and the car twisted in the center of the road. Then it rolled like a giant hand had slapped it away. Nicholas only saw scattered glimpses. Beth folding up. His father's hands flying away from the wheel. The seat above him; the trees dancing and attacking the car. The hum returned, drowning out the screams.

It was over. The Cadillac leaned against a tree. Nicholas crawled up the seat and was able to open a door enough to get out. He slipped and fell into a snow drift. It was past his knees when he stood and it was red.

Twisted as badly as the car, Jim Teach lay on the hood, the windshield in pieces around him; blood staining the glass. His eyes were open, almost staring at his son, but the snow soon covered them. Nicholas closed his also, forcing back what he felt: relief and hatred.

Beth was not in what remained of the car.

His coat barely kept out the cold, a normal cold now, and his shoes didn't even try. Nicholas looked away from the car. He knew that he should go back to the road and wait for help, but he couldn't find it. He had no idea which way it was. He felt he should panic, but he was calm, like his father had been sometimes.

"Nicky?"

He turned at Beth's voice. Through a wall of falling flakes, he saw a light. Nicholas felt it, a *special* light, warm and comforting. He trudged step by freezing step toward it, certain that he was moving away from the road. Minutes later, he saw her, glowing standing atop a snow drift. She smiled at him, more beautiful than he had ever seen her before, clothed in a gown that matched the night around them.

"You killed my father?"

"Nicky?" Her voice was quiet enough so that he shouldn't be able to hear it. Nicholas felt his anger, his hate falling away at the soothing tone. She felt *special*, and only that. He could feel nothing cold about her.

"Nicholas, your father used you. He made you kill for him. For him, many times, and not to save you, Nicholas. We couldn't allow that to go on. We look after our own. Our kind has to."

"Yes."

"Why?" he snapped, regretting it—almost.

Her smile remained. "We wanted to give him a chance, Nicky. He couldn't make you stop the truck, easily, but he made you kill instead. We had to be sure."

"He was my father?" Nicholas moaned weakly.

"And you did what you needed to do, but you don't need to anymore?" Nicholas wanted to believe her.

"No, one blames you, Nicky. We couldn't let you stay in an environment like that, and become a killer on your own initiative."

She held out her hand, soft and glowing in the night. He looked up into her eyes. Only kindness lay in them. His hand went out to hers, but stopped midway.

"Come with me, Nicky, please?"

She had killed his father. She could do it to others and use him for it, just as his father had. People were all the same. His father had been right about that, if nothing else. Nicholas smiled and he slowly look her hand.

Kill, he thought, and the snow burst into flames around her.

8

Coming in the Spring Issue of HAUNTS:

Stories By:

Kevin Anderson
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Look for it in the Spring!

RIDINGHOOD'S

Jack Morgan

Virginia gazed through the large picture window into Ridinghood's amber lit interior, where good-looking, well-groomed singles spoke, drank, smoked and gestured "twelve o'clock on a muggy Friday night, in late September, on the upper East Side of Manhattan, and no line of people waiting to get in. She knew that she just lucked out.

It seemed a popular enough place, fairly crowded but not packed, a lot of polished brass and dark wood—not overly ritzy but attractive. What really clinched the matter for her were the score of handsome mustachioed men she saw inside. She couldn't do any better, she decided.

At the door, she rapped the iron wolf's head knocker a couple of times, and a smiling doorman let her in. The doorman, suited, under thirty and handsome, differed from the usual stereotype by wearing a tie with a wolf stitched on it. He smiled "Welcome to Ridinghood's" and inside, she found it several degrees cooler than outdoors and much less humid. Disco music played very softly, which kept it quiet enough to talk and meet people, something she was not adverse to doing. She had realized that Brad was out of her life for good, after he transferred to Albany at his own request. If she had any doubts before, that proved he no longer loved her.

To her surprise, she found a free stool at the bar. She settled in, got the bartender's attention and ordered a White Russian. She was only twenty-six, and she guessed she had some catching up to do with the singles scene. She had never been much of a bar-grrrr, even before Brad.

The bartender, a silver-gray haired man with bushy eyebrows, brought her drink and a napkin. She sipped through a straw that stuck out from a bowl-like glass. She loved the taste of creme de cacao.

In the mirror above the bar she saw the darkly reflected image of a mural. She turned on her stool to face it directly. The mural, black and white, she viewed scenes from the Little Red Riding Hood story. All the characters were portrayed: Granny, Red, the Wolf, and the Woodsman.

Cute idea, she thought. It helped to have a gimmick especially in Manhattan. She smiled momentarily when a male scientist moved away to reveal a real axe, chained to the wall hanging between the

mural and a plaque. The plaque stated simply: *in case of wolves.*

As she turned back, she met the stern gaze of the bartender.

"Ever have much call for that axe?" she asked, trying to break his stare.

His face softened. "It's only a display, hon. Believe me, though, there've been times. There've been times." He moved quickly down the end of the bar, leaving Virginia to muse.

She liked this bartender. He reminded her of a gruff bartender from her college days, at the bar just off campus. His name had been Dutch.

But then her thoughts turned more somber. She noticed that the amber lighting in the bar loomed darker than necessary. Looking at the cartoon again, she noticed that the wolf had an evil leer, and that the drawing style didn't look as naive and charming as she first thought. She sipped from the drink to brighten her mood. After all, she'd come here to meet people and have a good time, not frighten herself half to death.

Then she met Alex. He'd been sitting next to her all along, but she hadn't noticed him until he introduced himself. He had a pleasant manner and a Slavic accent. Polish, he had said.

His speech annoyed her. He hadn't quite mastered the pecking of American speech. She didn't want to seem unfriendly, and he did want to talk. Before too long, he told her about coming to America to seek asylum.

When the conversation lagged, Alex would drink from what appeared to be a rum and cola. He appeared a little under the influence, and she reasoned that he must've had several already.

Alex had a large but straight nose and long black hair. While not as good looking as some of the other men in Ridinghood's, she imagined he could be attractive to some women. To some women, but not her. She had made up her mind almost immediately, that Alex wasn't her type. For one thing, she found him a bit eccentric. He wore a heavy blue suit that looked to be all or mostly all wool. She had to keep herself restrained from asking "Aren't you hot in that?" No, he definitely wasn't her type.

All the men she wanted to talk to, that stood first seen through the window, now talked to young women or else talked among themselves in festive congregate. Women outnumbered the men, and the men seemed in great demand. Well, these hunks seemed to be worth the price of coming to Ridinghood's. But for now, she'd have to make do with eccentric clean-shaven Alex.

She studied Alex. He sat at the bar instead of socializing in the aisle. He obviously was a heavy drinker. He'd ordered two more rum and colas in the twenty minutes that they had spoken to one another. She figured he was probably a regular. She had never met a regular at a singles bar before, and curiosity got the better of her. She brought the matter up.

"Yes, Ridinghood's is the *only* place I feel comfortable," he confided, avoiding her gaze. "I come on Wednesdays and Fridays. Sometimes other nights, too. I used to be in love with a woman, but

It's a very sad story." He paused to drink.

"Please tell me. I'd really like to hear."

"I believe you really would," he said, and looked at her with puppy-dog eyes. "The lady, said to say, was a witch."

"You mean she practiced witchcraft?"

"I am not knowledgeable in such things." He shook his head in awe, then continued, "She was an evil woman. She put a curse on me." Virginia began to wonder what resentment Alex harbored against women. He might not be as sane and good-natured as he appeared, she thought.

"That kind of curse, Alex?"

"A very effective curse." He surveyed the room, trying to find if anyone was paying him any mind; then resumed. "You see, she turned me into a werewolf."

Virginia giggled. But when she saw Alex frown, she wondered why he'd gone to the trouble to tell her his story in the first place. She let the last creamy swallow of her drink slide down her throat.

"Do me a favor Alex, and save my seat. I have to find the ladies' room."

"Certainly." He smiled gallantly and patted her hand before she left.

Walking down the aisle, she smiled at the young men she passed, but turned no heads until she brushed against a young man, about thirty with macho good looks and a reddish-brown mustache. The cigarette man came down from the billboard.

He chatted with one of Ridinghood's ubiquitous ladies in red, but after she brushed him, their eyes met, and he managed a soft hello.

She returned his whispered greeting and smiling, now continued to the corridor in back and the ladies' room.

She came to two doors. One read *Writers*, and the other *Little Reads*. Another cute idea. Maybe that's why so many women wore red. It helped them remember what lavatory to go in. No, she mustn't be cruel, just because they wore those red dresses to pander to the men, didn't necessarily make them stupid.

The ladies' room smelled of pine disinfectant. This was probably to keep with the Red Riding Hood thing. Every time you went to the john, you took a walk in the forest. And the red-dressed ones could bring the picnic lunch. She was being sarcastic again.

Ridinghood's wasn't a bad place, she had to admit, and if she met someone interesting—the billboard man, perhaps—she'd tell her girlfriends.

Let's see, where are we now? she wondered. Off Third at eighty-fifth? No, that couldn't be right. More like Eighth—main Street.

The lone stall beckoned and she went in. Inside on the stall door, she found the following dirty smeared in black marker:

RIDINGHOODS

*For a guy I came to Riding's
Now guessing what was hiding,
Lurking in the amber wood.*

To ensnare a Riding Hood.

I got him home and I found out

What the rumors were all about

When his nose became his snout,

Causing me to scream and shout.

Soon his face was leveled flat.

And his ground decreased my cut.

And when his yellow eyes flashed red,

We did it doggy on the bed.

Though my cat has met her end,

I now have a better friend.

I leash him with a good strong rope.

I love my little lycanthrope.

Virginia couldn't help think that anyone who wrote that had to have a sick mind. Here was the second time the werewolf theme had come up. First with Alex, and now with this poem. If a woman had written it, she certainly couldn't have been very liberated. On second thought, everyone was entitled to a little sexual fantasy—the obvious meaning behind the poem.

At the mirror, Virginia reviewed her evening at Ridinghood's while checking her make-up. She wondered when things would really get going how late to stay. Her watch showed quarter to one. New arrivals had trickled in, but just as many had been leaving. Oh well, all she needed was a little redistribution of the wealth. The men who were talking to women or their friends would just have to start paying attention to her.

The stall door opened. "Have you got a marker?"

"What?"

"A magic marker. I can write a better poem than that Oh, never mind. I'll use lipstick." She shut the door. "Thanks, anyway."

"Don't mention it." Time to get back, thought Virginia.

A young woman with raven hair and a low cut, scarlet gown was saying her seat. Virginia hesitated to sit again, perhaps it would be better to try the aisle. The woman, named Adrienne insisted.

"Did you see it?" she asked, once Virginia was atop the stool.

"See what?"

"You came from the john. My poem, did you see it?"

"You wrote that?"

The girl turned self-conscious. She took a swig of beer from the amber bottle she held.

"Yeah, I wrote it," she talked out of the side of her mouth. "What do you think?"

"Amusing," lied Virginia, who never found it amusing to deface a toilet door.

"It took me a week to write." Adrienne admitted. "I wanted to find a rhyme for lycanthropy, but that's a rough one. I settled for lycanthrope. Lycanthrope means werewolf. Thanks the Greek. For it and werewolf. Old English, meaning half man and half wolf. The girl ran through the synopsis of the werewolf legend.

Virginia could only smile over condescending lecture. Werewolves didn't particularly interest her. She had always found stories about them rather boring. The legend probably started to explain cannibalism or some other abomination. She got the bartender's attention.

"Another *White Russian*, please?"

He brought the drink over and told her it was on the house.

"You don't have to do that," Virginia said. "What a nice man,"

she said after he insisted.

"Yeah, Teddy's a regular saint. Either that or he's happy to use the shaker." Adrienne pointed to the drink. "What's in there, anyway?"

"Vodka, cream, and Kaluha. I think. Maybe even some wolfsbane."

Virginia kidded.

"Yeah, well, I'm not too hip on fancy drinks. I mean if you want a drink like that, you should go to a soda fountain."

"Well, it's not as fancy as a Pina Colada, and you don't have to shake it. Just pour the stuff into a glass, and drink."

"Yeah, well, I'll just stick with beer."

Of course she wasn't hip on fancy drinks, thought Virginia. There was nothing fancy or feminine about her. "You know, you're the second person to speak of werewolves tonight. Is it expected here, or are you a regular, too?"

"You could say that. The owner and me are pretty tight." She looked Virginia in the eye. "We even got a key to the axe on the wall."

Virginia didn't respond. Such talk of keys to axes made her skin crawl, even though she knew Adrienne was only trying to intimidate her.

"Who was the first?" Adrienne asked, after another swig of beer.

"The first?"

"To talk of werewolves. You said I was the second. So who else has been talking?"

"Alex has. Do you know him?"

While Virginia sipped her drink, Adrienne looked them both over, as if they were suspects for some dastardly crime.

She became annoyed at the young woman's manners. If Alex wanted to talk of werewolves, the weather, or anything else for that matter, it was his own business.

Adrienne, who now stood between both their stools, gave Alex a poke in the ribs with her index finger. "Giving away trade secrets, are we, Alex?"

Alex, either through embarrassment or intoxication, remained mute, hunched over his rum and cola.

"See you cats later," Adrienne said, her voice turned husky. She laid her empty beer bottle on the bar between them, and watched her way through the crowd of socializing singles, dodging the drinks and cigarettes in her path. She reached two hunks of masculinity at the back of the bar and jumped in between them.

"I wonder what her problem is," Virginia said loud enough so Alex could hear. If he wanted to. A few sips of the straw later

she thought, probably spoiled.

Adrienne, forgotten, began surveying the good-looking men in the bar. Well, it was the *Biggles* Women were liberated

they were all as rugged and outdoorsy-looking. Maybe they worked as lumberjacks, other outdoors professions. Wherever she noticed

one of them, with a red-dressed woman companion, she had

felicitous thoughts. Had she but known, she could have picked out

something good. Only she didn't have anything red, did she? She was

too subdued to wear red. Red was for aggressive types. Anyway, she

had on a very nice white dress and she was as attractive as most of

these women. Maybe not as attractive as Adrienne, but Adrienne acted

like an ass, anyhow. Twilight started to affect her. She began thinking

the crowd thought, and she knew enough to blame the alcohol. She

wasn't drunk—just happy. And it felt great to feel happy.

She looked over a blonde standing a few people down from her

This one did the others one better: she wore a red-hooded cloak and

dress combination, and sometimes, to the amusement of the men

and around her, she'd put up the hood. To Virginia she appeared to have

just dropped off movie lot. Now that would be funny, she thought.

Perhaps the film would be rated R. Wolves, maidens and young

women not to mention grandmas, as she pictured all this, she had

a funny thought. Werent' wolves color blind? If so, what was the

significance of little Red Riding Hood? It certainly must not have

mattered to the wolf.

Her reverie was interrupted by Alex, who asked if he could

buy her next drink. She still had a bit of her current one. And,

besides she didn't want to encourage him. "No thank you. Alex. I

appreciate it but no thank you."

Alex turned back to his drinking, and then she noticed that

the billboard man had broken free from his female companion. He

stood near the mural now, pretending to look it over. Maybe he

was, but he was looking her over, also. Mustn't be obvious, she

thought, and turned back to her drink. A couple sips later she

heard his hortatory voice. "My nanette's Sam, what's yours?" he asked.

"Hi, I'm Virginia," she said. And she knew something clicked,

that he was the right one, the one who would make coming to this

singles bar the smartest move she could have ever made. "We

ran into each other before," she said, smiling flirtily.

"Remember?"

He did. Soon the conversation flowed. He lit up a cigarette. She

kidded about looking like a cigarette advertisement. Although she

never smoked, all her boyfriends had.

She found out that Sam was a photographer and that he had his

own studio and apartment just a few blocks away on York Avenue. He

was thirty-four years older than she was, and he had ended a long

relationship about two years ago. Things couldn't have been working

out, nicer. She let him buy her next *White Russian*.

His eyes sparkled blue, she noticed. Soon his hand grazed hers

And now he held her hand, while in his other hand he held the beer

bottle he drank from.

If he had asked her back to his apartment right then to look at his photographs, she would have gone without hesitation. And indeed, his conversation had left hints of such a proposal. It wasn't that she was being loose, but she knew he was the right one, and she would have done just about anything to keep him from the many red-dressed vixens in this singles bar.

And then it happened. While Sam ordered another beer, Alex, whom she had completely forgotten about, leaned over and asked her for her telephone number. His hand held a ballpoint pen, and he laid a paper napkin in front of her on the bar. "Please, I should like very much to get together with you."

"I'd rather not give my number out." She managed a smile, trying to save the situation. She smiled at Sam too. He'd seen the interruption, and frowned in annoyance. He told Alex to butt out. But Alex wouldn't back down. This is America, free country," he raved.

Soon they shoved, pushed and swung at each other. Virginia watched nonplused as they locked in an embrace and stumbled to the back of the bar, banging through customers' spilling drinks and sending glasses crashing to their wake.

The customers took it good-naturally, almost as if they were used to this sort of outburst occurring, and took it as part of Ringhoo's nightly entertainment. They soon reached an enthusiastic frenzy and formed a semicircle in front of the two combatants.

In horror, Virginia looked to Teddy, the bartender. "Aren't you going to stop it? Can't you do something?"

He threw aside his bar rag and glided down the bar, closer to the action. "No stopping it now, hon. Not with the moon full and the wolfbane starting to bloom. It's the end of the bar, he became a wide-eyed spectator. "Great Fart Will you look at that!"

If not for her interest in Sam, she would have left the madhouse then; but instead she knew she had to fight through the onlookers if Alex and Sam could see her, hear her voice, maybe she'd be able to restore sanity.

Jostling through the crowd, fighting for the first row, she heard low growling sounds. Something in the back of her mind prompted unknown fears. Growls? Then the fear became more distinct. Alex's crazy werewolf tale. Supposing he really was one? Or just as bad, maybe he thought himself one. Then through?

Save Sam. "Let me through, let me through!"

To do, let her through, yells the female voice. In the front row, she saw the impossible for two hairy beasts, half human, half humanoid, in shredded dress clothes, grinnaced at each other while locked in an embrace. No noses but snouts had their teeth were bared and already their mouths spewed the blood of combat. As they tumbled to the floor, she swooned.

When she awoke she began crawling, not daring to get up, through the legs of the crowd, the growling louder now, forcing her heart up into her mouth and she gasped for breath. Past the voyeurs, her survival instinct drove her across the dirty wood

floor. To the left she saw the vestibule leading to the exit and safety.

But a foot to her shoulder drove her back, and a kick to her stomach sent her flying into the frenzied crowd, where, looking up between legs, she saw two full grown wolves—one gray and one dull brown—collide in midair, tearing and ripping with muzzles full of black gums, slaver and fangs. Already both muzzles were stained vermillion.

Now she heard the bartender's voice. "One bite to your face could rip your head off. That's how powerful those jaws are."

Virginia looked at the puddle of white liquid she had just vomited.

Blindly now she began crawling. Nobody seemed to care about her as they shouted for their favorite. At least, nobody tried to stop her. She had to get out.

She felt a wall and opened her eyes to see the vestibule ahead. Turn, girl, you're almost out of here, she thought. Then she saw red, and felt a knee smack her face, knocking her flat on her back with its wallop.

In agony she managed to sit up, whimpering, the crimson oozing from her split lower lip.

"Shut up," a gruff female voice said.

She couldn't control her sobbing.

"Shut up, I said."

She managed to still her sobbing a bit, and looking up to see her jailer.

An angry Adrienne guarded the vestibule. The axe blade, from the axe she must have taken off the wall, gleamed amber. "What's your hurry, doll?"

The crowd was silent, she noticed. The background growling had become lower, more pathetic, more like dying whispers. She vomited more of the white liquid.

"It's you they're fighting for."

BACKFIRE

Katherine A. Solts

Light dropped like a rope through the hole in the iron plate between Ned 'Slick' Wilson and the room where the saltnes, canned goods, and the frozen meats were kept. The woman who trapped him in the water meter pit beneath the storefront of her restaurant teased him with the glow of a two hundred watt bulb.

She left.

Ned had twenty-eight years in crime, forty-three in life. He was accustomed to fear, danger, and temporary setbacks. Unlike his last associate, Virgil Anderson, who was now looting leather in the state pen, Ned was not prone to panic.

"Mother told me there'd be days like this," he said from not trying to take his predicament too seriously. Still he felt the clear of foreboding and the chill of helplessness. The victim's side of the situation.

Damn! What went wrong?

"Well, Slick Wilson, what have you gotten yourself into now?" he muttered.

He held up his wrist and read the lit time on a wide smear of gold. Four thirty-two. The watch was probably slow again, as slow as the arthritic old man he forced it from. Like that old man, as thick in the land of cornfields and hopes where the starlings were as fruit in trees scoured by the malignancy of winter was supposed to be a cliché. A piece of cake. *Trapped in slow-as-molasses Nebraska* imagine that. What happened?

The owners were a middle-aged couple, the man as slender and functional as a push broom, the woman, like a polished plunk that popped-up hair. She was so sickeningly sweet, and accommodating that Ned was sure the candy was nearly out of the bowl's hand. But she wasn't naive or half-a-mind-running-toward-home. Like he thought it seemed that she *planned* for him, waited for him, for a long time she knew where he was hiding, knew his purpose, and knew where to look. How?

Ned was sure nobody look particular notice when he left, his table to go to the rest room, then was enticed to the storefront and the water meter pit in the floor. At that moment, Ned remembered the sign in the front window.

On Vacation 7:00 P.M. Today
On Vacation 11th February 16th

Thank you all our dear customers

The message was thick with sentiment, from the woman's hand. Ned guessed. The theft seemed so much easier, that he acted without scrutiny and lowered himself into the pit to wait.

But the woman wasn't soft and dean and brimming with affection. She was the biggest phony he'd ever encountered. She, unlike the liquor store owner in Louisville or the gas station attendant in Memphis, was clever. Ned hadn't given her credit for a devious and strong love of money. She was a snail at the cash register, didn't straighten the bills or place them all face up or face down as those who truly covet money.

The cash drawer held enough to create a passion!

Now before Ned seen such business in a small town cafe, nor so diverse a clientele. Some wore business suits. Others wore sweatshirts, plaid skirts, jeans, seed corn caps. Two were women dressed in men's clothing.

Ladies gushed up and perfumed surrounded a large table. They participated in a meeting and spoke of saving the community. Dark-skinned men whispered cold thoughts. Nurses or beauticians, small-talked a trucker fall to the language of stifled sighs. A young couple, fingers touching, admired each other. A girl with well-placed flesh sat herself conspicuous for attention. An old man with quicksilver eyes laughed at something he read. Comings and goings, in a steady stream.

The cafe owner fussed over them and they looked at her with affection and exchanged pleasant words with her at the cash register. Behind where the woman stood ringing up tickets and below a glass case of pie wedges was an old safe, in easy reach, like the one in a Sioux City pawn shop where Ned whacked the grandson of the proprietor with a fireplace poker and he fell moaning to the old floor and grinnaced against a chewed box of D-Con.

All Ned had to do here, he thought, was stay in the pit until they left and then climb out and take it all. It all should have gone without a hitch. At first it seemed that it did.

From hiding. Ned heard the brush of the broom, the straining hum of the dishwasher, the clunks of chairs pressed to the tables, then the sound of toilets flushing and water running in the basins.

But then the woman said, "We've got one, Andy."

"I just set the trap, Lucy," was the man's reply.

"Don't be an idiot," she snapped. "Her tone unlike that used with the customers. 'I'm not talking about a mouse, Andy, I mean a mouse!'"

"A man?"

"Don't be stupid. Yes, a man. Someone who means to rob us."

"Where?"

"Oh, Andy, sometimes you make me tired. Leave such matters to me."

"Who is it?"

"I don't know his name," she said with exasperation. "The man

at table three. The rat-thin man with the coyote face. You fixed a hot beef for him. He went to the rest room and he didn't come out."

"You probably missed him. He must have left while you were in the kitchen."

"No, he didn't. I watch the customers. I didn't hear the door."

"That doesn't mean..."

"But it does, Andy. You know how well I hear. I may pretend I don't when somebody makes an insensitive statement about me, but I hear very well."

"There was no argument to that."

"Maybe. He stepped up in the ceiling by the furnace," the man said. "I'll get a flashlight and check for a disturbance in the dust."

"Don't be ridiculous. The lowered ceiling wouldn't hold him. It would come down on him with it!"

"Where then?"

"Silence. Perhaps she gestured."

"I'll call the police, Lucy."

"I don't do such thing. Law what it is here, his intent might not be easy to prove. Drink. Nuts. There are many possible excuses. He might be clever in explanation. He might go free!"

"You would that be so bad? What would we lose if that happened?"

"Yes, that would be bad."

"What do you suggest then?"

"I suggest you leave it to me."

"What do you plan to do?"

"She laughed. "Never you mind."

Ned heard them directly above him then, and the movement of boxes.

"He might have a gun," Andy said.

"I thought of that. Get over here and help me move this deep-freezer."

"Why?"

"Because I want to change things around in here. That's why."

"I call the police, Lucy," he said with a grunt and the deep-freezer scraped across the concrete floor. "Carl will be glad to come."

"Will you stop going on about the police?" She sighed and chuckled.

"There, that should do it."

"Why in the middle of the room?"

"Air flow to the fan," she answered. Again, she was amused.

"You think he's down there?"

Ned realized with dumb-struck terror that the deep-freezer was partly over the namibian cover.

"Not everyone is afraid of closed-in places like you are, Andy."

Ned thought to call out, to say, "OK, OK, I'm here. Let me out. Call the police. I'll face the music." But he believed in his strength and ability to free himself once they were gone.

"You can't do this, Lucy. It's going to be well below zero tonight. He'll freeze to death."

"He'll get mighty cold, but he won't freeze. Let him have time to ponder what he meant to do. I don't want anything not rightly mine, and I won't have that taken from me."

"Oh, Andy, what are you doing?"

The man must have knelt. His voice was nearer. "Hey, you down there speak up."

Ned didn't answer.

"How long? Andy asked his wife."

"How long what?"

"Before you let him out."

"Then he's cold enough and cramped enough and weak enough for me to handle."

"What, then?"

"Then, she said loudly with sinister pleasure, I'll drag him out and cut him into pieces, little tiny pieces."

Her coarse black voice carried to Ned's heart. He bit his lip and lasted scarlet.

"Stop talking that way, Lucy," Andy scolded. "It's crazy."

"Of course it's crazy. Go on upstairs. Don't stand there with your mouth hanging open. It was a joke, Andy, a joke. You have absolutely no sense of humor. I didn't see the man there, but I don't really think he's hiding. He left and I didn't notice. It's as simple as that."

Honestly, Andy, you have no sense of humor at all."

"Yes, it seems so you."

"Go on, go on. I'll finish up down here."

One pair of footsteps moved softly away.

After a few moments the woman spoke close to the floor. "Am I amusing you, you dry bone snarl at me tell you a little story years ago I was forced to plant cutlasses because children kept uprooting my flowers. I'm quite well-known for compromise for fair play. For surrender. Not this time. I'm going upstairs to fix a fine supper. Well, have a glass of wine. Do you like Burgundy?"

I want you to like what you'll miss. Oh, and I'll give Andy a sleeping pill. Andy might not sleep very well. All poor snails. Suffers from conscience and worry. You will find I do not, and by the way, the snail down there, have you noticed it? That's chlorine insect killer. Pure (undiluted) quite illegal because it's so harmful to humans. But the State people don't check me too close. Sleep well!"

Ned heaved back in the corner. Fungus grit fell like sand. Webs hunged his face and the sharp flames of his cigarette lighter revealed solid brown and white and plied blistered with corrosion. Water dripped steadily from one of the elbows and broke the film on the pool below. Chloroform? Ned saw no moving insects, only dead roaches, their shells as long as the fingernails of the woman whose company he enjoyed.

Again Ned looked at his watch. Four fifty-nine. He was a patient man.

Six fifteen.

Eight thirty-six.

Nine twenty-eight.

It was time. Their supper would be over. The man would be asleep, maybe the woman too. Now he would get out and go to the upstairs quarters. He'd work that woman over good! He'd kill them both! Then he'd rob the place just as he planned.

Ned rose into position. Feeling himself was, after all, a simple matter of leverage. He raised his shoulder against the weighted lid. His knees sank in slime. He lay on his back and rained his feet against the rusty underside of the cover. He slid. From many positions he struggled until his body cramped and his flesh was abraded. Breathless, he leaned into the corner. The cold was as deep as his mood. But all was not hopeless. A change in tactics would be necessary. No more nice guy.

"All right," he said, "I'll wait until morning." He touched the .25 automatic handgun in his back pocket. Tomorrow the woman would be drawn curious to lift the lid. She would not like his greeting!

He rested. He woke many times and listened. At noon the next day Ned ate a wet Hershey's bar he had in his jacket pocket. It tasted of chemical. He caught drops of water from the leaking pipe. From time to time he tried to get out. Even the bursts of strength from his anger could not free him. He muttered to himself and swore.

Two days passed. Ned felt his stomach trying to digest itself.

Three days had been in the hole. He started coughing. His limbs were wooden on the fourth day, his hunger painful. He wept. Again and again he mistook creaks in the building for footsteps and alerted from his suffering.

On the fifth day the footsteps were real.

The woman spoke snuggly down toward him. "So tell me, are you getting a bit hungry? How does this sound? Crispy fried chicken. Whipped potatoes with milk gravy. Green beans with tasty bits of bacon. Rice pudding with plump juicy raisins. Hot coffee. That's what we had. It was delicious, even if I do say so myself. Just the right meal for a sub-zero day. Last night we had to turn the electric blanket up to 6. We were toasty warm. It's a beautiful day today. New snow all aglitter. You should see the trees.

A photographer's delight! Or a poet's and you, were you comfortable?" Ned coughed despite effort against it.

"Sounds like you caught a bit of a cold. Or is it the chlordane?"

Ned clamped his hands tight over his mouth.

"Still not talking, eh? I know you're there. I heard you cough. You might just as well talk to me. If you've learned your lesson, if you'd promise not to harm me or rob the place, well, I might be persuaded to let you out. That is, after we have a little chit-chat. Come on now, talk to me."

"Let me out," Ned Croaked.

"Ah, so you can speak! Do you promise to be a good boy?"

"Yes," he said and blinked on the aggravation of his throat. "I want to hear you say it. Say, *I promise to be a good boy.*"

"I p-p-promise, promise I'll be a good boy."

"There, that wasn't so bad now, was it? You do have a nasty cough, though. It sounds like your throat is full of paper. Do you have a gun?"

"No, Ned lied.

"Any weapon?"

"No."

"You're not lying are you?"

"N-n-no for chrissakes, let me outta here!"

"And you won't ever again try to take something that isn't yours? Or hurt anyone?"

"No!"

"Let me hear you say it. Repeat after me, I won't ever again take something that's not mine."

"The words scratched through Ned's throat.

"Or hurt anyone."

"I-I can't, I'm sick."

"S-s-say it."

"Or-hurt anyone."

"There, now don't you feel better about yourself? Let me think this over. If I believe you are sincere, that you've reformed, and if I let you out."

"Get me out of here!"

There was a long silence.

Ned eased the safety off his pistol.

The world around him burst with evil laughter.

"Do you really think I'll let you out? Fat chance! You should have called out when Andy was here. You'd have your only chance. He's forgotten all about you by now. He's probably slumped in front of a basketball game on TV, sound asleep. So you see, I have all the time in the world to deal with you."

Ned heard her footsteps, the faint scrape of metal. It sounded like she was sharpening knives.

She returned to the hamlock cover, tapped metal on metal. She described in infinite detail how she meant to cut him up and dispose of him.

"It's later than I thought," she concluded. Tomorrow-lomorrow will be soon enough. Andy maps every day."

For six days, she brought Ned a package of fear. For six days, her step was a mocking, manufactured pace above him. Half a dozen times she sharpened knives and came to the hamlock, and tapped, taunting Ned with the minute details of his demise. Each time she postponed. Andy didn't intend to kill him. Ned finally realized all along she planned to let him die at his hitting place, slowly, painfully, with plenty of time to think.

Ned looked at his watch. February the ninth. It was a week yet before the restaurant would open again for business. Her scheme was apparent. On the eleventh, or thereabouts, Ned's body would be discovered. The police would be called. The story would be of how the

SKINNER LANE Simon Clark

rearrangement of the storage room *accidentally* trapped a thief where he hid. And the woman loved by the community, trusted, sweet and accommodating, would perhaps shed a few tears and be believed.

Ned no longer felt any pain, only weakness and lethargy. It took both hands to hold the gun, to face it. He took a long draught of anemic air. He thought of an arthritic old man with a slow watch and a young man sprawled on the parashop floor, and he panicked. He pulled the trigger.

The last thing Ned saw was Andy's sleep-puffed face as he dragged the lid from the hole. 5

"Kenny, what on earth's happened?"

His sister, arms tightly folded, stood framed by the stone doorway of Thorne Manor. She watched him struggle up the long curve of the drive, weighed down by the bag of potatoes.

"Kenny." His sister's voice was changing shape. Angry.

"For God's sake, what have you done... Well?"

Kenny had been running so they wouldn't catch him. He lowered the bag and sucked in enough air to speak.

"I've been to the shop, S-sue."

"I know where you've been. It's just what you've done in between that's a mystery. Just look at your shoes... and that hole in your T-shirt! It's ruined."

Kenny shrugged which he knew meant *there's so much to tell, but I don't know where to begin*.

"Come on now, you must know how you got into such a state. You look as if someone's tried to murder you! Oh, never mind that now, Michael's coming home a day early. He'll be here any minute, so run and get cleaned up! You know what he'll say if he sees you like that."

Kenny's sister was in a flowing summer dress, red as strawberries, her face made up, and Kenny caught the scent of fresh perfume. He should've guessed. She always dressed smart when Michael came home. Michael.

"Why are you pulling a face for?"

"Michael's dead horrid," said Kenny.

Kenny, I can't understand a word you're saying. Remember what Doctor Sharma said. Speak slowly, lots more slowly."

She ruffled his thick rust coloured hair, knocking his cap down over one ear.

"Now take those potatoes to Mrs. Tomlinson. And stop pulling those awful faces, or people might think you're funny."

Another grimace, like biting into something sour.

"What's the matter now? Aren't you glad Michael's coming home?"

An emphatic shake of the head.

"You really are ungateful. You know that, don't you, Kenny? Listen, as soon as we were married, Michael said, 'Sue, I don't like the idea of Kenny living with all these strangers in that horrid house. He can come here and live with us in the country-side. Now wasn't that

kind?"

Kenny pulled another face. "M-Michael kicks me!"

His sister was surprised. "Yes, I expect he will kiss you. We all love you. Now hurry up, its bath time and Kenny, do try very hard to speak properly. You know how cross Michael gets when you babble."

Kenny heaved the pillows over his shoulder, and walked down the hall.

Look at this mud! This carpet cost a fortune! Hurry up, and remember to take off that silly cap."

Even when he was in the bathroom, his sister still shouted instructions.

"Don't run all the hot water... clean the bath... put on your new Kids From Famine T-shirt... and take off that cap!"

Her voice was different now, wobbly, excited. Michael was coming home.

Kenny hated Michael. He hated lots of things. The Home, where balls had always been either too hot or too cold, all those bright green tablets they gave him that made him nauseous, Michael for sending him down to the pub in Old Slavery village for matches, where men with voices shaped like mountains would laugh at him and knock off his cap.

The walk down Skinner Lane as far as the stone bridge was all right, but he hated the trees. Where the lane crested the hill, the trees grew closer and closer together, arching across to block out the sky completely. It was like entering a deep dark tunnel. Kenny's heart would beat faster. He would get sweaty, and a voice in his head always said the same word: *scary*.

Once he counted the trees to stop the voice. He managed to reach more than a hundred before the voice returned. *Scary, scary*. Kenny guessed there was less than a thousand trees, but they seemed like a million.

Then he heard them stalking him.

Last week he was certain they were the Daleks from Doctor Who, this week he wasn't so sure. Maybe they were man-eating monsters—like the ones in his comic book.

Kenny whooshed the steaming water round the bath.

He'd been lucky that time, he had learned his lesson. Now, he always left the lane at the trees to walk through the sager beet field. His shoes would get muddied today his T-shirt got torn as he climbed through the barbed wire fence, but anything was better than getting caught by *them*.

He wondered what they would do to him if they ever caught him. Something horrid, unbelievably horrid like like when Mr. Tomlinson cut up the dead rabbit right there on the kitchen table. When Mr. Tomlinson heaved at the stretchy skin, it had ripped away. Kenny hated the noise. Like a plaster being torn from your leg—hairs, scab, and all *ri-ri-ri-p. Uuuc!*

He hated the sight of the knife opening up all that red mess

inside was horrid, but when Mr. Tomlinson opened up the stomach that was when Kenny had seen the most horrible thing—ever. He had wanted to leave the kitchen, but Michael had been there. Laughing. Michael made Kenny watch as Mr. Tomlinson put his hand through the furry slit in the rabbit's stomach on pulled out...

Kenny tried to wriggle free, but Michael only tightened his grip forcing Kenny to face the gut oak table as Mr. Tomlinson pulled out those things—horrible things. The rabbit's stomach was full of snakes. Gray, slinky snakes.

Michael's voice was slippery smooth.

"See and I are having poached egg on toast for tea. Guess what you're having on your toast Kenny?"

Both Michael and Mr. Tomlinson had laughed as the grey snakes slithered out of the rabbit's stomach, growing longer and longer...

"Nasty, nasty." Kenny shook his head and poured his sister's Givernchy bath oil into the water. Now he would smell nothing like the kids at the Home. He held his breath and slid down the enamel bath until the water covered his head, washing away the Home smell, wherever it still might linger.

Yes he hated that smell. He hated the big scary trees on Skinner Lane and the wet snakes in the poor rabbit's belly. But, most of all, he hated Michael.

Michael "I've missed you, love"

"Missed you too, Sue. Hey, wait till the audience is gone!"

Kenny was watching *Top Cat*. Something wriggled snake-like in his stomach. It always wriggled when he saw his sister kiss Michael. She would not kiss him if she knew what Michael did to Kenny.

"Hello there old boy." Michael's voice was as big and grand as his Rolls Royce, and when he spoke to Kenny, it was as cold and as hard.

"Where's Kenny been up to? Oh, you're wearing your Famine T-shirt? You're funny, eh?"

Kenny hated *Kids From Famine*.

"I just finished up to the kitchen, Michael!"

"Do you want me to open the claret? I'll need to breathe a bit."

She laughed. "No, I managed to remember this time."

Michael sat next to Kenny on the settee, pinning him with his fingers.

"So, how's life been treating you, old boy?"

One day, Kenny thought, these fingers would go right through.

"I-I'm all right, Michael. Thank you."

"Take that cap off, Kenny. You don't want to wear it indoors. Rubs your hair off. Look what happened to mine! Ha, ha!"

Michael frisked Kenny's hairy cap to the other side of the room.

"Ah, it's good to be home. All I've done is talk, talk, talk. God, old Rossington's a blithering idiot. It's probably easier to fork sand than to get him to see sense. No wonder they shunted him into the Lords' Ah.."

Michael stood up.

"Just enough time to shift some grime before dinner."

"Just enough time to shift some grime before dinner."

He loosened his tie, gazed at the cartoon for a moment, then looked at Kenny intently watching Officer Dibble chasing the mischievous alley cats.

"I thought you'd be watching the big fight on the other station, old boy."

Michael's big fingers stabbed at the controls, switching channels at random until columns of horse racing results flashed up on the screen.

"Back in a jiffy," said Michael and disappeared until dinner.

Dinner was uncomfortable. Kenny never enjoyed mealtime when Michael was there. He had to use his knife, eat so carefully, that all the flavour went from the food.

Michael talked incessantly about money, his battles in the boardroom, attacks, counter-attacks, fiscal strategy. Sue listened intently, occasionally laughing or nodding. Before, Kenny had tried to please Michael by joining in the laughter, but he had been told off so often, that he now kept quiet.

Kenny's gaze was riveted to his plate. He knew if he raised his eyes a little, he could see Michael energetically slicing at his rare steak. Red raw, like the rabbit Kenny shuddered. *Nasty*. But it would serve Michael right if he cut it open to find it full of snakes. *Gray, slimy, wet, nasty.*

He raised his eyes a little further, and there would be Michael. Forging great chunks of red meat into his sloppy mouth, or gulping down glass after glass of blood red wine, then smacking his lips in a manner that Kenny was forbidden to do.

Raising his eyes yet further, he would be looking out the window, over the green expanse of neatly trimmed lawn; beyond would be the fields growing dull as day slipped imperceptibly into night. Beyond the fields would be Skinner Lane, snaking up the hill to vanish into the body of trees which seemed to bubble up from the hilltop like green froth.

Kenny kept his gaze downward, watching the cheeseburger going cold on his plate. He never looked at the tress on Skinner Lane. They gave him feelings bad feelings.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," said Sue, "that chap's been at it again."

Michael paused, the glass at his lips.

"The maniac? Yes, the boy at the garage told me about it."

"I don't understand it." Sue sipped at her wine. "A small town like Updon. Surely, *someone* must know who it is."

Kenny tried to be conversational in the way Doctor Sharma had taught him.

"S-Sue said it was l-the m-m-manager from the supermarket that had been attacked."

Michael suddenly looked hard at Kenny, as if trying to find something in his face.

"Yes, had the top of his head knocked off, poor sod."

"I-I-that's nasty. Nasty." And Kenny meant it.

Michael saw something in Kenny's face—something he liked. "They say it was done with a spade. Blood all over the road, flies crawling in it, so they say."

"Michael, not while we're eating, please," laughed Sue, then nervously added, "Make sure you look all the doors and windows tonight."

"Updon's ten miles away," said Michael. "Mark my words, the maniac will stick to somewhere he knows. Anyway, Kenny'll protect us, won't you, old boy? Ah, Sue, did you open the Bordeaux?"

Sue ran lightly to the sideboard and returned with a full bottle. "Ah, good girl!" Michael filled his glass to the brim. "Cheers! You don't know how good it is to be home. All I'm going to do this weekend is relax and enjoy myself. God knows, I've earned it!"

Usually Mrs. Tomlinson washed the dinner things the following morning, but when Michael was home, Sue set to work tidying the dining room, washing the plates and cutlery, cleaning down the cooker. Michael approved.

"Your sister makes this big old house a home; she pulls her weight."

Michael told Kenny this often. He repeated it again as they sat on opposite ends of the settee while watching television.

It was nasty of have Michael with him; even worse to be alone with him, and worse still to be so far from the kitchen that his sister couldn't hear what Michael said—or did.

If only she knew...

But perhaps, thought Kenny, tonight would be different. Tonight, Michael would be happy to be home; might be nice.

For a moment, Michael watched ice skating. Then he swore, stood up, and poured himself a large brandy.

"Ice skating? When are they going to show the fight? Ice skating isn't sport. Just silly boys on skates. God..."

He returned to his seat, sipping the brandy and smacking his lips.

Restless minutes passed as Michael fidgeted, grunted and drank. Kenny sat impassively watching the television. Michael swore again then took out a cigar, looked at it thoughtfully, replaced it, then said, "Kenny, have you ever wondered what it would be like to be skinned alive?"

Kenny's eyes opened wide.

"You know," Michael continued, "to be peeled like you were one big banana."

It was startling. Kenny tried to speak slowly so Michael would have no excuse to get angry, but it was difficult when he was nervous.

"I-I don't know, Michael."

"That business with the maniac. It reminded me of something," Michael went to refill his glass. "But you'll prouise you'll tell us one." Michael looked hard at him. "Not even Sue. We don't want to frighten her, do we? Promise me, Kenny."

Michael's voice had changed shape. Flat and low like something unpleasant—creeping.

"I—I promise, Michael." A silver ran up Kenny's spine.

Michael spoke evenly, ensuring that every word was understood.

"You know, there was some trouble 'round here about thirty years ago. People disappearing, being attacked, and so forth. Ah, an unpleasant business. Very unpleasant, indeed."

Michael refilled his glass, drifting faster now.

"What happened?" asked Kenny, not really wanting to know.

"I've kept Michael talking. She might return before before Michael became bored."

"Every so often, people would vanish, Kenny. Out there on Skinner Lane."

Kenny smelled the brandy on Michael's breath.

"Did they catch him?"

"Not a hint, old boy. If And no, they never did catch it. It's still out there—somewhere. Waiting."

Michael saw something in Kenny's face again. That something he liked. Discomfort, uncertainty, fear.

"A m-m-monster? There's no such thing as m-monsters."

"Oh, but there is, Kenny."

"Monsters d-don't exist." But he had heard them, rustling through the trees on Skinner Lane.

And didn't. She always say that Michael was brilliant, that he knew everything?

"Monsters are owe-only for pretend. They're not real."

"God, it's a good thing you're only incontinent. Incontinent, and your feet wouldn't touch old boy. Speak clearly, for God's sake, you sound like a barrel full of monkeys."

"Ah, I said, monsters are pretend, like on television."

"Right, Kenny. Why do you think that lane into the village is called Skinner Lane?"

"I'll."

"See, you don't know."

Michael refilled his glass, hands trembling. Excited.

"Well, I'll tell you. Skinner Lane was so named because that is where something called the Skinner lives."

"S-s-skinner? I—I mmm."

"Yes, Kenny, old boy. The Skinner? He's lived down there since—since the dawn of time itself."

"Not true, haven't seen it!"

"Ha! That's because it's in hibernation somewhere up in all those trees. You see, Kenny, every thirty or so years, the Skinner wakes up. Now just think how hungry you'd be if you hadn't eaten all day. Just imagine if you hadn't eaten for thirty years! You wouldn't be hungry, would be bloody ravenous."

"Can't you picture it? The Skinner, swinging through those trees like a ruddy great orangutan. Mad with hunger, it sees some poor sod walking up the lane—someone just like you, Kenny—walking all alone in the dark."

Michael grinned easily. Now this was *entertainment*!

"There you are, walking along, not a care in the world then, BAN?"

Kenny jumped.

"The Skinner's on your bang, bang! Hammering you on the road like an egg until your skin splits, then whoosh! It carries you away to the tree tops. There it begins to peel you."

Michael look out a cigar and tried the coffee table lighter. It didn't work, but instead of the usual string of curses, Michael just smiled and put it down.

"Yes, just imagine, poor daft Kenny, skinned alive by the monster. I wonder what it's like. Hearing your own skin ripped off. Rip, rip, rip. Then, it peels your face off in one piece—like a mask—and nails it to a tree."

"I don't believe you, You're nasty!"

"Oh, believe me, old boy. Every damn word is true. Ah, just think, then it sits down and eats you up like roast chicken. Pulling off your legs, crunching them up in its big mouth."

Kenny winced, the words like blades slashing down his chest.

"Once the Skinner gets you, your dead meat! Poor, poor, Kenny! The Skinner hangs his skin out to dry, high up in the tree tops."

Sharp steel blades kept slashing down.

"No, Kenny was scared. Sweaty scared."

"Your face peeled off. Can you picture it? Daft Kenny's face hanging from a twig, scaring blackbirds!"

"No, s-s-s-slop it! M-m-masty Michael!"

Michael sat back, face red, his cheeks puffing out. He hadn't finished yet. Kenny's horror was like a rare old wine, and there was more to savour.

"What time is it, Kenny?"

"Half past ten."

"Half past eight."

"Hm-mm, it'll be dark in half an hour, Kenny. Pitch dark," he chuckled. "What do you think to The Skinner then? Just a silly fairy tale?"

Kenny pulled a face and nodded.

"Well, well just have to wait and see. But once you've seen its nest—all those poor sod's skins—you'll believe. Of course, it'll be too late by then. Far, far too late, you'll be dead meat, Kenny. Dead meat."

It was over. Michael sighed, seeming to deflate, his hand limply held the glass. Drained, but satisfied, he fixed Kenny with a strange look and smiled.

When Sue entered the room Michael was warm, relaxed, and content to watch the ice skating. Kenny, his face twisted by some strong, unbreakable expression, sat hunched and tense.

"Stop pulling faces, Kenny, it's not nice."

Kenny smiled, sat at last.

Michael pulled out a cigar, peeled off the cellophane, and tried to light the cigar from the coffee table lighter.

"Oh dear". Michael feigned surprise. "We'll have to get this refilled." Then he half-heartedly patted his pockets.

"Kenny, old boy, seems I'm clean out of matches."

Kenny's face burned, then he shivered in anticipation of what was to come.

"Be a good lad and nip down to the pub for a couple of boxes, would you? And get yourself a bag of crisps. The money's on the table."

Kenny felt as if life itself was draining from him as he stood.

"Hurry up," said his sister, snuggling down beside Michael. "It looks like rain."

Kenny looked through the window. Outside, it was nearly dark in the distance. The Skinner's trees were dusky cumulus shapes that began to undulate in the gentle breeze. The trees lay beneath the larger shapes of thunderheads stalking the horizon.

An ominous roll of thunder rolled over Thorne Manor.

As Kenny watched, the last gleam of daylight died, then something fantastic happened. The clouds and trees merged into a single threatening shape. The voice in his head started.

Scarey, scarey.

He could picture himself walking along Skinner Lane, away from the safety of the house. A forlorn figure gradually being swallowed by the dark. Under the trees would be The Skinner: a monstrous indistinct shadow, hungry for warm meat. Lord yes, it would be ravenous. Kenny's only hope would be to take the flashlight and cut across open fields.

"Oh, and be sure to stick to the lane," said Michael. I've seen your shoes. I want you back here, clean and tidy." Smiling, Michael looked deeply into Kenny and saw that thing he liked. Fear.

"You'll be back in half an hour—if you're lucky."

Kenny walked as slowly as he could. What if he refused? No. Michael had told him before. Any bad behaviour and they would send him back to the Home.

"Wait a minute, Kenny. There's a box of matches in the kitchen," his sister said. "Mr. Tomlinson left them there this morning."

Michael's mouth was the shape of a smile, but his voice was like ice.

"That saved your legs, eh, Kenny?"

Kenny didn't have to be clairvoyant to read Michael's mind: *Wait until next time...*

Huge raindrops rattled against Kenny's bedroom window. He climbed into bed and lay there, delaying to switch off the light. He was too upset to sleep.

Why had Michael tried so hard to frighten him? It had started with Michael turning off the lights and making ghostly moans while Kenny was alone in the room. Then, it was scary stories. And now—worst of all—The Skinner.

Imagine if you hadn't eaten in thirty years. Kenny just imagine, peeked like a ripe banana.

Could the Skinner really be there? Crouched in a tree, peering down through the leaves. Waiting.

Kenny pulled on his cap. It made him feel better.

It did, but he was still to tense to sleep. The same questions battered around in his head. *Why us? Michael so cruel? When Michael was in a foul mood or had drunk too much, it was a sharp cuff that did the hurting.*

He knew Michael wouldn't rest until he got Kenny to go! to the village in the dark, down Skinner Lane. He shuddered. Would the Skinner get him?

Then, Kenny did something brave. He turned off the light.

At two AM, he saw the Skinner.

There it was, seven feet, no ten, feet tall, lit by an inaudible flash. Then as the thunder roared, the bedroom was plunged back into darkness once more. Instinctively, Kenny snatched at the light cord.

No! Let the Skinner get you in the dark, better not to see its face.

Kenny turned on the light to reveal nothing.

Cautiously, his heart pumping hard, he leaned over to see if the Skinner was crouching on the floor. Nothing.

Suddenly feeling hot enough to boil, he flicked off the bedclothes, and flopped back onto the sweat-soaked sheet.

The Skinner had been there. He was certain; the image was still clear in his mind. Bead-like, naked, a huge gray man, it sloped because the ceiling prevented it from standing upright. It had used one shovel-sized hand to push away the pink lampshade from its face so as not to interrupt its view of Kenny.

The big fat face was angled downward, heavy jaw thrust forward, thick lips parted, exposing yellowed teeth as large as clothes pins, and the eyes...

Kenny shook his head, trying to dislodge the picture. It wouldn't budge.

The gray skin was like that of an elephant, hide, pink warts rammed over the upper part of the chest, while here and there, red hairs bristled across the skin.

Kenny struggled not to remember, but the solid image squeezed through some tight hole in his mind flashing there as bright as a television picture.

The eyes, there were no white parts, just big dark eyes—glossy black—filling the sockets just like ripe plums.

And down below, Kenny kept trying to think of something else. *Baa-baa black sheep have you any wool? Yes sir, yes sir, three bogs full—and...*

Evaporating sweat chilled his skin. He crawled under the bedclothes and curled up tightly. But not to sleep.

More lightning thunder rumbled. Kenny had heard of people dying of fright, and he was very, very frightened. Kenny didn't know much, but he was certain of one thing. Michael made this happen. Before it was too late, Michael had to be

taught a lesson. A lesson he would remember—always. That night, Kenny didn't sleep. It wasn't fear that kept him awake. He was thinking.

Saturday night. Descending the open staircase came his sister. Best dress, hair done up, jewelry. She looked like a movie star.

"Are you feeling all right, Kenny? You look worn out." Before his reply, she looked at the grandfather clock. "God, is that the time? I'm due at Alexander's at eight. See you later, Love. Get what you want for supper."

Michael, glass in hand, appeared at the door of the lounge. He smiled broadly.

"Michael," asked Sue, "are you sure you don't mind me going tonight?"

"You go and enjoy yourself. Take the Rolls, if you want."

"Don't sit on the stairs, Kenny. No, the MG will be just fine, Michael."

"My tree, Sue. Take the Rolls, but try not to bend it. Promise?"

"I promise. Thanks, Love."

"Oh, leave the keys to your car. I might have to pop down to the village later. I'm down to my last cigar."

"Bye, Michael. And you behave yourself, Kenny."

She left, leaving Michael and Kenny alone.

For a tense moment, Kenny stood, not knowing what to do or say. Michael went to refill his glass, then his voice boomed into the hall, making Kenny jump.

"Don't make the place untidy, old boy. Come in here and watch television."

For an hour Kenny watched the cowboy film, and Michael was nice. Too nice.

Occasionally, a secret smile would flit over Michael's face and he'd glance out the window or at his watch. Kenny, engrossed in the shoot out, didn't notice the important thing. The thing he'd planned for; should have watched out for. He never noticed the sun set.

"Kenny?"

Michael stood and held out the key to the MG.

"You know it's not really convenient to have only one key for Sue's car." He smiled like a confident assassin. "Slip down to the village and get a spare cut, would you?"

Kenny shook his head.

"A—n—no. Saturday. Nothing open—open."

"Nonsense. The filling station on the roundabout's open twenty-four hours a day. You'll find they cut keys there. Run along, Kenny."

Outside, it was moonless and very, very dark. Kenny was appalled. Somewhere in those trees would be the Skinner. Waiting.

...if you hadn't eaten in thirty years, you wouldn't be hungry.

Michael pushed Kenny into the hall where he gave him a little plastic flashlight.

"There you go, old boy. Don't want you getting lost in the dark, do we?"

Michael, smiling broadly, watched Kenny tie the laces of his blue sneakers.

"Kenny." The voice was slippery smooth. "Did I ever tell you I'd seen a picture of the Skinner? Nasty brute, I tell you. Long sharp claws, fangs and loads of vicious teeth—like a shark. It looks like that big hairy swamp monster from Doctor Who. Remember?" Michael had to stop himself from laughing out loud. "Remember, you were so frightened you hid behind the settee."

Kenny reluctantly pocketed the money knowing Michael was sending him to his death, *peaked like a ripe banana*. Michael would sit in the lounge, happily drinking, while Kenny was being viciously torn apart by the Skinner.

And how you go, called Michael as Kenny walked down the drive. And if you hear any strange noises, don't worry, it's only the Skinner waiting for a juicy little chap to come along. Chernio. Then Michael snut the door and Kenny heard muffled laughter.

Nasty Michael, thought Kenny. If only he had a gun, then Michael would have to watch out.

Kenny followed the feeble puddle of yellow light thrown from the flashlight. Ahead, the lane lay hidden in darkness, scary, scary. Where was the Skinner?

The Skinner? Kenny stopped dead, surprised by his own flash of understanding. The Skinner looked nothing like Doctor Who's marsh monsters. The Skinner was a large grey man, a pimply and rubbery. No horns, no claws, no fur. Michael was wrong. He did not know anything.

Suddenly Kenny's heart beat faster. He had a plan. Taking the money and the key from his pocket, he hid them by the gatepost. Then taking his pen-knife, he forced the blade through the lining of his trouser pocket, a tug and the hole at Thorpe Manor, breathless and scared. He had to do it. Even though he knew Michael was going to get meat-eye popping red-faced mad.

Michael looked up, his face a picture of annoyance.

"What the hell are you doing, Kenny?"

"For Christ's sake, spit it out, man!"

"A—n—mum—S—s key?"

"What about the key? Where is it?"

"I—lost it."

"Oh, for crying out loud. You can't have. You put it in your pocket."

Kenny turned out his pockets.

"No wonder look, there's a ruddy great hole in it!"

Michael was boiling mad.

Kenny frightened, wished he hadn't done it now. But there was no going back. The plan had to be followed through to the end.

"Come on," snapped Michael. "We'll bloody well go look for it."

You're going to be sorry, lad just wait until we get back. And take that bloody cap off!"

Michael took the powerful torch from the garage, then marched off along Skinner lane, a brilliant light cutting a great swath through the night. Kenny had to run to keep up with the furious pace.

"Right, now where did you drop it?"

Kenny's stutter grew worse.

"Aa... It went... like ting-ling-ling."

"Well where, for God's sake?"

Kenny pointed along the lane. They crossed the stone bridge, then climbed to the hall where the trees arched across Skinner lane.

...the Skinner's trees... scary...

Kenny stopped when he reached the trees.

Michael's voice was a snarl.

"I'm phoning the Home tomorrow. They can have you back. I'm not putting up with..." His voice trailed off as he noticed Kenny had stopped.

"Where? Around here?"

"Further, I—further." Kenny pointed to the black tunnel of trees.

"Are you sure? Right, stop here, now."

Then, Michael stride into the tunnel, the light swinging left and right as he searched the ground.

"Are you sure you heard it drop here?"

Michael's voice was a different shape now. "Well, where did you drop the key?"

Kenny knew *that* shape. Fear. The knowledge was uplifting. Michael was afraid of the dark.

Somewhere, branches creaked oddly.

"That the..."

Michael shone the light upward. Kenny caught a glimpse of Michael's face. Really scared.

Strangely, Kenny felt no fear. There were trees, massive dark shapes. Once, they held all the monsters of the world. Now it was different. Kenny listened for the voice to say *scary*. It was silent.

A moment later, he heard something like something big—something giant—pushing through the branches.

Michael heard it, too. He shined the light into the darkness, illuminating clumps of green.

Those there? called Michael

Slowly, Kenny began to walk.

"Come on, booned Michael, 'You're frightening n-no one... My

God'! Noises. A crack. The torch flashed wildly, lighting great waves of green, then it went out. Total darkness.

Kenny turned out and behind him, Michael shouted incoherently. Kenny turned off the torch.

Kenny turned off the torch...

Then, Michael screamed.

Kenny stopped. Michael's voice was a shapeless yell of pain, panic, and terror jerked from somewhere deep inside. Then it stopped. Silence.

The Skinner had got him!

Kenny looked back into the hole of the tree tunnel. He saw nothing, heard nothing.

As he stood, the head voice came back, but this time it was saying something different. No more kicks, no nasty jokes, no scary stories—no more Michael.

Kenny's spirits rose. He wouldn't have to be afraid of Michael coming home. Then, unafraid, he walked under the Skinner's trees. On the road was something the size of a penny. In the gloom it looked like a single drop of glittering black engine oil. Kenny looked up as something whirled through the trees.

"Thank you."

Kenny's voice was like a silver bell: clear with no stutter.

"Thank you, Mr. Skinner."

His sister was very upset, and Kenny did his best to comfort her.

The house had been full of people and Kenny made sure he did all the right things: like wiping his eyes with tissue, or sitting quietly with his head in his hands.

"Poor dear," Mrs. Tomlinson would say, and Kenny would keep his eyes downward.

The police asked him dozens of questions, then took him up to the Skinner's trees where there were yet more police. They found the roadway and grass verges particularly interesting. One photographed the smashed remains of Michael's torch. Dotted about on the ground were paper ladies tied to sticks, and one patch of earth had been cross-crossed with lengths of white tape in which two policemen squatted, apparently searching for something.

"Is this the brother-in-law?" asked the detective.

"Yes," replied the constable, "but you'll get nothing from him. He just pulls faces and gibbers thick as pig shit. It is."

Kenny looked down at the white lines on the road, making sure he didn't look upward—not for a second. He knew somewhere in the branches above, Michael's skin would be flapping in the breeze, like clothes drying on a wash line. And Kenny would bet that Michael's belly had been full of nasty white snakes which would be festooned through the trees like Christmas streamers.

Kenny wasn't scared. He'd just keep looking down so he wouldn't give the Skinner away. If the police found out, they'd probably call in the army.

That was last week. The police had left without questioning Kenny any further.

Pretty dark, egg. Michael's son, Nigel, came to stay. Already he had taken the Rolls and was bossing Kenny last night, he even turned out the light when Kenny was in the bath. Nasty Nigel.

From then on, the garden wall, Kenny could see Nigel sitting at the patio table, working a pocket calculator, a full glass of wine by his head. Occasionally, he would nod and smile, then drink from the glass. Kenny swivelled around to look at Skinner lane.

THE GAME

Patricia Ramsey Jones

The trees were too distant for him to catch sight of the Skinner, but it didn't matter. Kenny *knew* what he had to do.

One day soon, he would fill his Harrods' carrier bag with King-size Mars bars, soft mints, and cans of chilled Pepsi, and there would be something else in the carrier—a secret. Then, wearing his army cap, he would march up the lane to the Skinner's trees.

On the wall, Kenny closed his eyes, feeling the hot sun on his back. In his mind's eye he saw himself looking up into the trees. The Skinner's tree would be the largest: a thick trunk driving outward, upward, and skyward; milk-white fungi ascending the trunk like the rungs of a ladder to pout pale lips through leaves that strided as some large body passed downward through the heart of the mighty tree.

"Mr. Skinner," the call would be loud and clear. "Mr. Skinner, it's Kenny, your friend I've got something for you."

The branches would be parted by two huge shovel hands and the Skinner's gray face would be looking down from the shifting ceiling of leaves. When he recognized Kenny, he would smile broadly and hold out his hand. Kenny would take it, and laughing happily, both would climb up into the Skinner's green world. They would sit astride a branch facing one another. Around them, skins would be rustling like paper.

Kenny, opening the carrier, would pass out the treats. On one branch, peeled faces hung out like natty old masks, and right at the end would be Michael's silly face, scaring no one—not even the tiniest sparrow.

Then Kenny, quite casually would say, "I've got another surprise for you." And he would give the cap he had been saving for a special occasion—the postman's cap Kenny's father had won.

"Thank you, Kenny. You're very kind," the Skinner would say, his big dark eyes filling with tears. He would keep the cap forever.

For the next twenty minutes—no an hour—Kenny would tell the Skinner stories, and he would listen intently, hanging onto every word that was spoken. An hour later, they would listen intently, hanging up the lane, and Kenny would say, "Time for a Mars bar, first."

Then the Skinner would get Nigel too.

The room was without decoration. No ceilings, floors, walls, or entrances to mark its boundaries. In the center, surrounded by a sucking and whirling mist, a chess board was set to begin.

The board had been in constant motion, each completed game followed immediately by another. The game pieces differed from the traditional in that the King, Queen, Pawns, Knights, and Rooks were indistinguishable from one another. Each figure was a mishapen lump of gray clay, its rank identifiable only by its position on the board.

The players sat opposite each other, eager to begin the battle of wits and strategy. They took no breaks nor changed position. Their histories of wins and losses were unimportant. They concentrated only on the struggle at hand.

The first had a huge belly filled with contempt that scratched at the edges of the chess board. His arms seemed dwarfed by the massive body. Sweat puddled creamily in the folds that were his neck, lurking in the fatty pockets of his face, a maggot scurried in self-inflicted burial. An expression of detached amusement creased his bloated features. He played the game in a haphazard carefree manner.

His name was Fate.

The player opposite him was thin, almost gaunt. His bones shone whitely through translucent skin. His face was engraved by passages of defeat. Enamelated translucent blades formed a cradle for his stilet neck. His long fingers, capped by the ragged edges of bitten nails, fluttered twice in the air then clutched the edge of the board. He was very concerned about the outcome of the game.

He was called Justice.

Fate began The Game. Picking up one of the gray lumps and holding it between fleshy palms, he rubbed his hands together, molding the clay within. Then with an amused wink at Justice, he blew sour breath on the featureless figure. An oriental cast, shadowed the tiny face framed by jet black hair. It was a slight body with miniature hands and feet. A female figure.

Fate placed the piece on the board and made his first move.

Kiku Matsumori was named after the chrysanthemum. The flower's beauty was complimented by her calm grace. Kiku was born of a family of frugal, yet patient farmers.



She was *Shoua-Born*, of the post-war generation, but her upbringing had been a subtle blend of modern experience and age-old Japanese tradition. She excelled in school as well as under the tutelage of her mother in the tea ceremony and flower arrangement.

Her marriage to Billy Matsuori had been arranged by the two families. A native Japanese-American, he met her on a vacation to Yokohama, courted her with delicate Japanese style and, after marrying her in a Shinto ceremony, transported her to America.

Billy worked in a housepainting business owned by his uncle, and each evening after work, Kiku and he would travel through the city. He patiently pointed out Western landscapes and customs.

Billy was anxious for Kiku to learn English so she could receive her U.S. citizenship. By pointing out to various objects in their apartment, and discovering their American counterparts, Kiku grasped a basic understanding of the English language.

She became anxious to further her imitation of the American wife and told of her desire to find a job. At first, Billy was not delighted with the prospect, but the experience she would gain dealing with other Americans would be valuable in her pursuit for citizenship.

So he bought a pack of play money and for the next two weeks, taught her how to make change. When he felt Kiku was ready, he helped her fill out the application for a neighborhood convenience store. Kiku won the job, but with no seniority, she was assigned the night shift.

Kiku was anxious to speak with her husband. She had dreamed of the treasure ship which carried the Seven Gods of Good Fortune. As she prepared lacquered trays with paper wrapped chopsticks, she recalled the cargo on the legendary boat.

"It shall be loaded with gold, silver, coral, and crystal," she recited. "Its holds will overflow with agate, emerald, and pearls. And in the carved teak box, the Book of Learning shall reign." She remembered the story she had been told as a young girl of this extraordinary ship and its unusual cargo.

"Deep in the bowels of the ship, an Honorable Man may find the Hal of Invisibility, a Lucky Raincoat, the Sacred Key, and an Inexhaustible Purse." Her grandfather had told her that dreams of the treasure ship were a sign of good luck for the entire year.

She arranged the rice cups on a low table and checked the *suimono*, a delicate fish soup prepared only for special occasions.

Kiku Matsuori was anxious to speak with her husband. She wanted to tell him that they were expecting their first baby in about seven months.

Just as Fate's first move, and while not surprised, he was horrified at the positioning of the pregnant woman. He chose one of the Pawn pieces. Probing and pinching the icy clay, he began forming the features. Then he paused anxiously before he blew into his cupped palm and placed the figure on the board.

Billy Matsuori was caught in a traffic jam. Ordinarily he would

have been home by now. He and Kiku usually enjoyed the tea ceremony and some previous conversation before her shift at the store. But he was trapped on the expressway, the late summer air squeezing and tightening within the car.

Billy slammed his hands on the wheel. The traffic would have moved slowly, but smoothly, had the other drivers not felt inclined to rubberneck at the overturned tractor-trailer in the road ahead. Each one dreading, but subconsciously yearning for a glimpse of blood and gore.

Billy had been taking chips of dried paint from beneath his fingernails, his stomach reeling with a sudden uneasiness. Suddenly he had a vision of Kiku in her marriage kimono. The scarlet silk was embroidered with cranes and tortoises, symbols of good luck and longevity. An orn fastened lightly around her waist in a butterfly knot symbolized happiness.

Billy Matsumori was flooded with an unseen dread. The kimono, normally wrapped from left to right, was folded in the opposite direction. A style reserved only for burials.

Billy scanned the traffic blocking the nearest exit, now desperate to reach his wife.

Watching Justice's move, Fate was amused with the counterplay but had grown weary of the initial sparring. Deciding to escalate the game to a more exciting fever pitch, he reached confidently for his King piece.

Roger J. Osborne floated somewhere in an oblivion of herbicides, cocaine, cheap wine, and beer. A street-wise and habitual offender, he had viciously resisted all attempts at rehabilitation. Roger had no love for the law, the judicial system, society, and least of all for himself.

He stumbled from the couch, tripping over crushed beer cans, wine bottles and fast food containers. He grabbed the handle of the refrigerator, oblivious to the dried and crusted remains of food on the door, then paused to steady his spinning head.

At first glance, he could see that his stock of liquor had disappeared. In a rage, he swept his arm across the shelf splattering the remaining food to the floor.

"Whatcha doin' R.J.?"

A woman stood in the bedroom doorway, a yellowed T-shirt clutched to her chest. Her eyes skipped back and forth from the garage on the floor to R.J.'s trembling hands. He jerked at her, yanking her head back by the hair and slamming her body into the door frame. The T-shirt fluttered to the floor and covered her bare feet.

"Where's your money?"

"Her eyes grew wide. A liny line of saliva escaped the corner of her mouth. R.J. raised his fist in front of her face.

"I said," R.J. twisted the hair laced through his fingers. "WHERE'S YOUR MONEY?"

The woman gasped through her tightened windpipe.

"Don't get none!" She watched his eyes narrowing above his shaking fist and whined, "Honest, R.J. honest! I don't got no money! Please let go. I'd give it to ya if I had any! Honest!"

R.J. pushed her backwards into the bed. "You better not be lyin' to me, bitch! You'll be sorry if you're lyin'!" He dumped her purse on the floor and snatched up a pack of cigarettes. "You just better not be lyin'!"

Reaching behind the couch, he grabbed a sawed-off shotgun and crashed out the door. The woman wept until she heard the roaring catch of a muffler, then climbed back into bed.

Billy Matsumori could dimly see his exit approaching. He glanced nervously at his wristwatch. It was past the time for Kiku's shift at the store. He knew she would have gone on without him. A maple leaf drifted onto the windshield, tumbling slowly out of sight. The maple leaf, normally a sign of good luck, was an ill omen for Japanese lovers.

For the heart, like the maple leaf, has changed its color.

Billy could not shake the apprehension clawing at his nerves. He began to fiddle with the radio in the gathering darkness of the Toyota.

R.J. Osborne parked his van in a shadowed corner of the Moonlight Market. He could see the clerk cleaning a soft drink machine through the windows of the store.

He was in luck. There were no other customers in the store. "Same ol' that works there every night," he whispered to no one in particular.

I bet she'll understand the double barrels of my friend right between her eyes, as he thought of her limited English. He reached behind him, shaking fingers connecting with cold steel. And if she outs just one started eye. He smiled as he climbed down from the van.

Billy Matsumori raced for the store, the Toyota's engine screaming in anguish. The tires lurched, squealing as the small car skipped over the curb and into the parking lot. He didn't notice the darkened van parked by the corner of the store.

With an undeniable urgency, Billy leaped from the Toyota and burst into the store. Kiku glanced up, smiling at her husband, her grin suddenly freezing as she stared over his shoulder and past him.

Instinctively, Billy lunged at Kiku, knocking her to the floor as the windows exploded. He pressed her face tenderly to his chest as glass pattered his back like lethal rain.

R.J. Osborne was in a foul mood. The effects of the drugs and the alcohol had long since worn thin.

"Fucker good!" he roared, his echo blending with the rock music blasting from the speakers. He caressed the shotgun lying innocently in his lap. The next victim would not be so lucky.

Justice glanced nervously at Fate.

Check, he whispered. The play of Fate's King had been blocked. Fate glared at Justice and sneered. "The game will go on!"

Melinda Young cradled the telephone in her hand. "I'm *really* sick, Doris," she wheezed dramatically. I just can't make it to work tonight."

She paused and coughed loudly into the receiver. "Do you think you could fill in for me? Oh, thanks, Doris! I'll return the favor if you ever need it!"

She put the phone back on the nightstand and reached for the young man lying beside her. All set, she whispered, sliding her long tongue from his ear to the base of his neck. He groaned, burying his face in her breasts. Melinda traced a bawdry film down his spine with just enough pressure to keep a shuddering while trail.

"Now just what do you suppose... we can do to make me feel better?"

R.J. Osborne peered through the gloom beyond his windshield and saw the blinking neon lights of an all-night gas station. Adrenaline surged as the van glided to a stop beside the gas pumps.

The attendant, a twenty-three year old law student, looked up from his studying and watched the van approach the islands. He marked his place in the books and started working.

R.J.'s eyes had narrowed to slits. It might have appeared he was dozing had it not been for the solid grip he had on the shotgun, intentionally propped at the window's ledge, the air, leading a parade of Student's a shrill whistle splintered the air, leading a parade of police cars and emergency vehicles. They roared past the station, swinging into the moonlight. Market don't the street.

The attendant turned to gape in the direction of the catastrophe and failed to notice the van quietly sliding away.

Justice looked up from the chess board and made the unexpected announcement. "Check!"

Fate was growing annoyed. With two losses under his belt, he now wanted to win the game badly.

Karly Sonntag was a salesman for a national meat packing company. He had been on the road for three days and was anxious to sleep in his own bed tonight.

"Six days on the road and I'm a gonna make it home tonight," he crooned to the accompaniment of a clicking speedometer. He reached for the thermos of black coffee nestled between his legs.

"Yep, and that song is dedicated to ol' Karly Sonntag, number one salesman for Imperial Meats!" He mimicked a cackling disc jockey, then laughed at himself.

Suddenly, he flinched as a specter loomed then disappeared on the shoulder of the road. A hitchhiker! At this time of night, Karly was often sentimental about his own crisscross college days. He was grinning broadly as he stopped on the brake.

Justice glanced at the board warily. It was a favorite strategy of

Fates to pick on such innocents. Sometimes he was successful in intervening on their behalf. More often, he wasn't.

His bony fingers ached to grab his King piece. Instead, he reached for a Rook.

Charlie Bitlers watched the taillights flash from the car ahead. Swinging a backpack over his shoulder, he ran up the road to the waiting vehicle. He clutched a Swiss Army knife in his jacket pocket to keep it from bouncing out on the pavement. With any luck, he'd soon be on his way to L.A.

cars.

Doris Tingley's shift at the Quick Stop was going slowly. Beginning to regret taking the shift for Melinda, she snapped on the black and white TV set beneath the counter and opened a can of Coke. She didn't immediately acknowledge Roger J. Osborne's entrance into the store, and her life.

Roger J. Osborne was badly in need of something. The humming fluorescent lights offended his ears, his mind sluggishly trying to recall what had drawn him into the store. He stumbled to the cooler, grabbing a six-pack of beer. He pressed the shotgun stuffy against his right leg as he swung the carton onto the counter.

The girl glanced at his package, deliberately avoiding his eyes. "That'll be two eighty-seven."

R.J. stood patiently waiting. The eyes. For some reason, it was important to see her eyes.

"I said that's two eighty-seven," Doris Tingley looked up, sensing rather than seeing the face of Death across the counter.

R.J. stared dreamily into her eyes as he slowly raised the shotgun.

"Here's your two eighty-seven!"

"Where ya headed to, buddy?" Karly Sonntag snapped his eyes from the road to the young man seated beside him.

"Just driftin', man."

Karly studied the young man from the corner of his eye. Stringy blond hair was pulled back by a ragged bandana. His sharp hawk-like profile was expressionless as he stared into the darkness ahead.

"Well, I've been on the road for three days and that's enough for me!"

The young man blinked in the glare of oncoming headlights.

"What d'ya do for a livin', son?"

"Just driftin'," his silent partner answered.

Karly began to question the wisdom of his Good Samaritan actions as he noticed the young man's hands twirling feverishly in his pocket. Spotting the refuge of a Quick Stop ahead, he swerved his car into the parking lot alongside an idling van.

"I need to get something to wet my whistle," he croaked, leaping from the car.

Charlie Bitlers scrambled from the passenger's seat. "Hey! wait, man!"

He stopped in the doorway of the Quick Stop, blocking Kary's Sam's entrance and unknowingly the exit of RJ Osborne. He felt the door slam into his back, knocking him to his knees, and whirled to stare into the intense gaze of RJ Osborne.

Fate watched Justice as he merged his King piece. He leaned back, hacing his fingers together and waited for the predictable fashioning of a police officer.

Justice shoulders strained over the last piece of clay. His face, an orchestra of agony, winced under the strain. Fate slowly eased his massive frame forward, intrigued by the gentle prodding of Justice's fingers. The clay beneath his hands had been magically transformed into a child's skateboard.

Kary Sonntag stood frozen in shock staring at the remains of the young hitch hiker. Charlie Bitters lay face up, his hands pressed together on his chest in a gesture of prayer. Blood pulsed crazily from his body and turned ebony with the store's brilliant illumination. Kary watched in slow motion as the muzzle of the shotgun shifted from the still form of Charlie Bitters to his own face.

"Mother of God!" he cried, his voice floating eerily away from him. "I'm gonna die!"

RJ Osborne dropped the forgotten six-pack and smacked at the mesmerized man covering before him "I do believe you're right."

He stepped toward his paralyzed prey. With one slick motion, his left foot slid clumsily on a skateboard, twisting his body in a neat pirouette. With bulging eyes, he glimpsed Charlie Bitters' lifeless hand still clutching the winking blade of a Swiss Army knife.

"Checkmate!" Justice sighed and passed his hand over his eyes.

The Game was over. He had saved Kiku and Billy Matsunori and their unborn child, Melinda Young, a twenty-three year old law student, and Kary Sonntag. But the loss of Doris Tingley nipped at his conscience like a ravenous hound. Perhaps a more skillful player could've saved her. Perhaps not.

"Amusing game! Very amusing!" Fate pushed the chess board away from his bulging torso. "Care to play again?"

ⓑ